

How to use social media to engage employees

Strategies to improve communication and collaboration



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1.

Strategy

The rise of social media within organizations signifies a departure from traditional communication methods and heralds a new approach to employee communication and collaboration. As such, it requires a new approach in terms of strategy and implementation. In this chapter we examine some of the fundamental differences between traditional and social media, and summarize the most important issues to consider when developing a social media strategy.

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1.1 Introduction: A new approach to strategy

Organizations that have embraced social media are understandably excited about the new opportunities they present to engage employees, encourage conversation and promote collaboration. But, as both our quantitative and qualitative research reveals, there are unique risks and challenges involved when introducing social media tools inside organizations. From the outset, a different mindset is required and a new strategic approach should underpin any efforts to integrate social media with the existing communication infrastructure.

1.2 What the survey data tells us about strategy

In a global survey in 2007, Melcrum heard from more than 2,100 executives about how blogs, podcasts, wikis and other collaborative technologies are being used to communicate with employees and customers.

The benefits that internal communicators in particular believe can be gained from the use of these tools inside the organization are reflected in their response to a question on the top two perceived benefits offered by social media (see Figure 1.1, opposite). Improved employee engagement came top of the list (71% of internal communicators selected this), followed by improved internal collaboration (59%), the development of internal communities (51%), and the ability to create a two-way dialogue with senior executives (47%).

Communicators are clear about the potential benefits of using social media tools, but how confident do they feel when it comes to implementing these tools within their organizations? Only 28% of the internal communicators who responded to the survey said they knew how to use social media as part of an integrated communication strategy (see Figure 1.2, opposite).

1.3 Issues to consider when developing your social media strategy

To get an idea of the typical issues faced when developing a social media strategy, we spoke to a range of organizations that have made progress with the introduction of social media internally. Their stories are captured in the case studies and advice shared throughout this report. Based on their experiences and their “lessons learned” so far, we’ve created a checklist of 10 important issues to consider when developing your own strategy.

1. Assess your organization’s cultural readiness

Before you begin experimenting with social media, it’s worth reflecting on whether tools such as blogs, podcasts or wikis have a realistic chance of survival, given your organizational culture. “The internet, on the whole, is a fairly democratic place – and social media certainly works very much on that model, says Ross Chestney, head of communication services at BT, a global telecoms organization. “However businesses, on the whole, are not at all democratic. That may pose a significant challenge to this working internally.”

Fig 1.1: Perceived benefits of using social media tools as indicated by internal communicators (respondents checked their top two benefits)

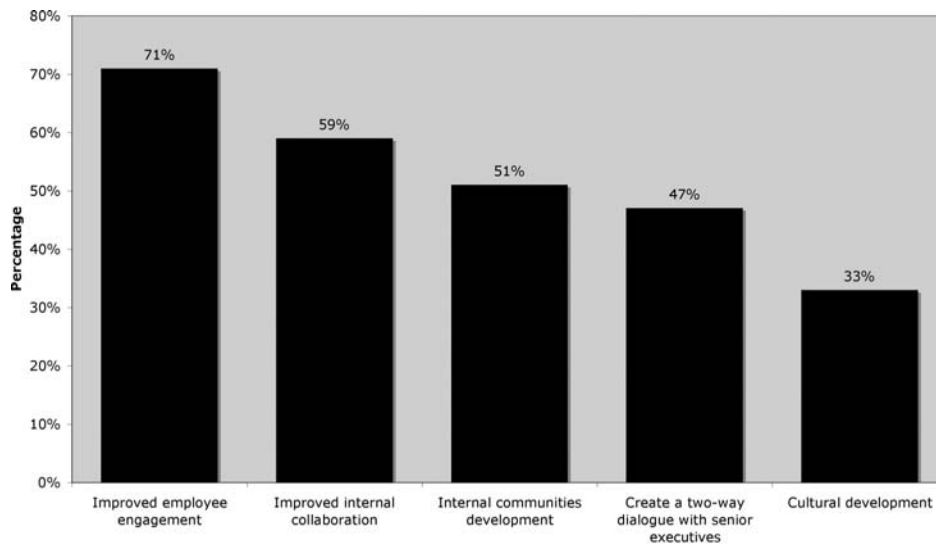
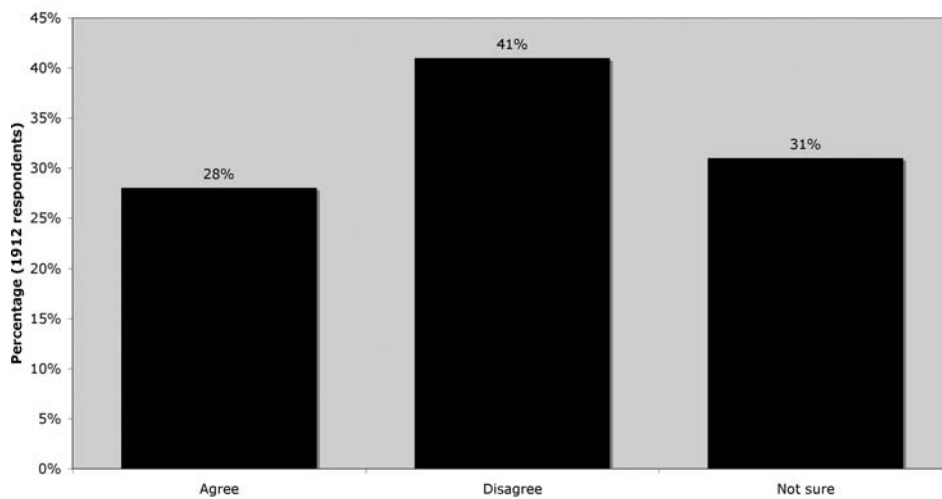


Fig 1.2: Response to: I know how to use social media as part of an integrated communication strategy, as answered by internal communicators



The case study on page 14 describes Chestney's approach to developing a social media strategy for BT and shares guidelines for fellow practitioners. He predicts that for organizations still practising command-and-control, top-down management, it could be difficult coming to terms with a more democratic style of communication. Only if the organization is willing to embrace a different model of communication will social tools find traction, he warns.

This conclusion is echoed by Philippe Borremans, new media lead in Europe for technology organization, IBM. "The first step in building a social media strategy is to recognize that it's not for every company or every employee," he says. "It all stems from →

← understanding what kind of company and culture you're working in." In the case study on page 16, Borremans explains why pursuing a social media strategy makes sense for IBM. Not only does it suit the company's culture, the tools are actually playing an important role in a cultural shift taking place within the organization, to move away from a hierarchical way of working.

2. Focus on the people, not the technology

A common problem that often emerges when organizations consider introducing new tools and technologies, is the tendency to overlook the needs or preferences of the people who will actually use them. Lee Bryant, director of the Headshift consultancy, which helps clients devise and build social-media applications for their businesses, points to examples from the past to illustrate this point.

"In the 1990s, we were all involved in building these expensive, over-engineered, very clever IT superstructures," he says. "They never quite worked because they were systems built as systems, rather than as things that were able to expand and move in a human way with human users. They were costly, they were grand scale and, in the end, you had to try to shoe-horn people into using them because they weren't built with the users in mind – they were designed only to centralize and simplify the IT system itself."

In the article on page 20, Bryant shares guidance on how organizations can avoid this happening. His key words of advice are: Focus on the humans rather than the technology.

3. Think about the business purpose of the tools

It's easy to get caught up in the excitement of new tools and technologies, without ever really clarifying what the tools are expected to achieve. But as with any new technology, those involved with the roll-out of social media tools should be asking very specific questions like: Who will use these tools? How can they support or generate useful conversations in the organization? How can they give employees better access to leadership? How can they help global teams to collaborate and communicate better? How can they change the culture?

But it's important not to get caught up in the hype, says Helen Love, formerly internal communication manager at Microsoft UK and now working as an independent consultant. Microsoft has employed a number of social media tools within the organization and is using them successfully to help cut down on information overload (see the case study in Chapter 4, page 67). But Love is pragmatic about what the tools can and can't achieve. "New media won't suit every person or every organization – in the same way that traditional media aren't fit for everyone," she says (see article on page 22).

Once you're clear on the actual business purpose of the tools – even if it's something fairly intangible like "to help develop a more involving culture" – you'll be led by the goals you're trying to achieve, rather than the technology itself. At IBM, for example, every tool introduced is there to support the way global employees connect with each other. This business link is clear when you read about how each tool is being used internally (see the case study on page 16 of this chapter, as well as pages 59, 81, 88 and 118).

4. Make sure you grasp the difference between traditional and social media

Social media tools encourage a way of communicating that is fundamentally different to traditional methods of communication. Without a clear grasp of these differences, it's unlikely organizations will ever really harness their potential.

In the article on page 14, Ross Chestney of BT observes that: "There are an awful lot of people in this community who are very excited about this [technology], but still have no real idea what it's about. As an example, he cites a situation where a communication manager asked him how she could "drive up subscription rates" for her RSS webfeeds (see Chapter 4, page 63 for more about this technology). That demonstrates a fundamental lack of awareness about the nature of social software, says Chestney. These tools are not about 'push'. As a communicator you provide the tools, you shape their use and you set guidelines for use. The audience then decides what's useful and what's not.

Philippe Borremans makes the same point in the IBM case study (page 16). "This is not something you can force," he says. "By its very nature, social media are organic and democratic. The users decide what technologies they want to use and how they want to use them."

5. Prepare to relinquish control and share the process

The way in which social media works – placing all users on an equal footing – means reduced control for communicators and leaders. Employees become equal partners in the communication process and are invited to take part in a conversation and share information, rather than have information pushed at them.

William Amurgis, intranet strategy manager at American Electric Power (AEP), summarizes the way in which our use of technology inside organizations has changed from "top-down" to "side-to-side" in the case study on page 23. Side-to-side communication, he explains, is all about conversation and involvement: two important characteristics of social media.

The term "side-to-side communication" pops up again in the case study from Nortel on page 25. In an attempt to make employees part of the communication process, the organization has invited them to get involved in generating news for an online internal publication. So instead of the usual top-down approach to communicating, messages are effectively going from employee to employee, resulting in more "democratization of content".

Lee Bryant also suggests that we "get comfortable with ambiguity" (page 20). "That's one of the great lessons of the rise of the blogosphere," he says. "Simple, person-to-person conversations can blossom into quite large exercises in knowledge sharing if they're allowed to grow in whatever way they need to."

6. Be experimental and involve employees

In an article on page 26, Joyce Lewis, marketing and communications manager for the Electronics and Computer Science school at the University of Southampton, stresses the need for communicators to think radically differently about how they communicate using web-enabled technology. "It's still fairly radical for communicators to think of the web as a completely different entity, rather than just another publishing medium," she says. →

← Fortunately, unlike major technology investments made in the past – such as intranet development – social media isn't costly to implement. In many instances, it doesn't cost anything to set up, as many examples throughout this report demonstrate. All you need is broadband access and an intranet to host the tools.

This gives practitioners far more leeway to be experimental. In the article on page 20, Lee Bryant remarks that, "the pressure is off. You start with simple, small, cheap localized tools that work with individuals and groups, and then you aggregate upwards and outwards later to get the scale and the network effects at an enterprisewide level." Ross Chestney from BT also urges practitioners to try out new tools and "succeed or fail quickly – and therefore cheaply".

Practitioners have also found that involving employees in the trial and development of social media encourages their acceptance of the tools. It helps employees become familiar and comfortable with using the tools, in their own time. BT has had success with this approach by producing "beta" sites for employees to experiment with (see page 14). "It gives you some leeway to have problems and glitches without a sense that 'this isn't worth persisting with' – employees understand it's only a trial," says Chestney.

7. Clarify what employees can and can't do

Social media may be all about encouraging a more open, transparent and democratic way of communicating internally. But this doesn't mean that organizations shouldn't lay down clear guidelines about the appropriate use of social media within the business. However informal, there's no reason why communication taking place via a blog or a wiki should stray from the usual behaviors expected in any workplace interaction, such as professionalism or respect.

In the AEP case study on page 23, William Amurgis explains how the move to make the company intranet more interactive – with tools such as online discussion forums – is supported by clear guidelines, spelling out the consequences of unacceptable behavior. Anonymity is also prohibited. "Employees realise that they'll be held accountable for their comments and keep the rhetoric at a professional level," he says.

In the IBM case study on page 16, Philippe Borremans talks about how the company introduced blogging guidelines to provide structure and clarity for bloggers, but also to manage the security and regulatory risks of blogging. In Chapter 2 (page 29), blogging guidelines and "codes of conduct" used by organizations such as GM and the World Bank are discussed in more detail, and in Chapter 6, financial services company ING shares its "Six Golden Rules" for employees using the ING Wiki (page 95).

8. Take a hands-off approach to marketing the tools

Unlike previous attempts to draw attention to internal communication channels, like the intranet or an employee publication, social media tools seem to work best when they're allowed to develop and grow organically. At IBM, for example, the core focus of the new-media strategy has been on putting together the platforms and software, then consulting with employee groups about how to optimize their use and potential.

BT has also taken a hands-off approach to marketing their social media tools. In most cases, the software is provided, but the user is allowed to determine what it will be used for.

Another advantage of this approach is pointed out by Richard Dennison, internal program manager at BT: “People are instinctively fearful of radical change. We’ve altered our approach and positioned web 2.0 technology as an evolutionary step: ‘We’ve been doing this for years with e-mails, discussion forums and so on. This technology just makes it easier and faster to communicate and collaborate’ (see page 19).

9. Work with what you’ve got and integrate new tools

Given the fledgling nature of most social media programs, the approach that seems to work best is one of using existing technology wherever possible, learning through trial and error, and developing tools further based on what’s working and what isn’t.

Scottish & Newcastle, for example, have just begun dabbling with the social media concept by introducing a very simple vox-pop question on the intranet (see page 27). The “Big Debate” question asks employees to share their opinion on various company-related issues. It’s a small step, but it’s designed to encourage more participation and engagement with employees using an existing technology platform.

Nortel hasn’t implemented new technology to allow employees to get involved in generating news – it’s simply using an existing online publication to embrace the core tenets of social media: involvement and inclusion (see page 25). The University of Southampton has introduced a highly popular podcast and videocast series also using existing technology (Chapter 3, page 56 and Chapter 5, page 77).

We should also be looking to *integrate* new tools and applications with existing channels and media, rather than replace them. AEP, for example, worked with its existing intranet facility and introduced a special area devoted to employee collaboration and interaction (page 23). At IBM, social media has to a large extent been seamlessly integrated with other communication resources, for example, the intranet search facility extends to all areas of the site, including new media aspects (page 16).

10. Don’t obsess about the numbers

Measurement is a key element of any communication strategy – the point where the circle is completed and success is measured against the initial goals and objectives. But the simple fact is that for most organizations, it’s too early to measure the financial or business success of social media tools with any real reliability or accuracy. But this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be making the link between the tools and the business purpose they serve.

In our chapter on measurement (Chapter 9, page 121), communication research and measurement expert, Angela Sinickas, shares her views on how the impact of social media tools can be assessed by focusing on the outcomes of using them rather than the activity surrounding them, such as number of comments on a blog (see page 125). We also focus on the importance of anecdotal feedback from employees when gaging the usefulness of social media tools, an important element of a pilot or trial to experiment with tools.

One conclusion is that, given that these tools usually require very little budget to set up, perhaps for now, our focus should be on what we can be gained from making them available, rather than the return on investment in financial terms.

BT

The key principles of social media development

The world's oldest communications company, BT was once simply the UK's national phone provider. After deregulation and the rise of internet and mobile technology, the company has undergone a dramatic strategic shift over the last decade. This \$34-billion business is now a full-scale telecoms and IT solution provider – around the world – from phones and internet networks to business consultancy and technology innovation.

Now BT is at the very forefront in the internal application of social media. From wikis to blogs to podcasts to MySpace pages and more, the company provides its 105,000 employees worldwide with a tasty smorgasbord of social tools and collaborative software. Head of communications services Ross Chestney offers advice to those who want to get on in on the act.

1. MAKE SURE YOU KNOW WHAT IT IS

His first point is simple: Are you actually on board with the central tenets of social software? "There are an awful lot of people in this community who are very excited about this, but still have no real idea what it's about." He cites the example of one communication manager coming up to him with a keen and well-worked social media strategy, but just one quick question: How could she drive people to the RSS feeds (or webfeeds) she had set up?

This, he says, is a fundamental issue. "She may have meant how can she drive up her subscription rates, but that still demonstrates a fundamental lack of awareness about the nature of social software. These tools are not about push.

They're not about driving. The very point of them is bottom-up control. As a communicator, you provide, you shape, you set guidance and you enable. That's it. The audience then decides what's useful and what's not. If no-one subscribes to your feeds, you can't force them."

If you understand the tools, but not the philosophy they represent, he firmly advocates reading *The Cluetrain Manifesto* by Christopher Locke, Doc Searls and David Weinberger. "That's where it all begins," he says. "Social media is all about conversations, and being involved in those conversations. The book and website set it out eight years ago. Everyone with an interest in this stuff has to read it."

Once you're on board with the foundational concepts, there are a few golden rules of roll-out, he says:

2. DO IT CHEAP

The main benefit of these tools is that they're cheap to use and cheap to run," says Chestney. "If you focus on the value, not the risk, you'll see that."

3. DO IT HANDS-OFF

One of the key components of social software roll-out across BT has been its somewhat democratic ideal (see case studies on BTpedia, page 90 and MyPages, page 110). In most cases, the software and platform is provided, but the user is allowed to determine what it will be used for. "That's essential and it makes your job easier," he explains. "You don't have to have all the answers – let employees provide the answers through their own usage. They'll spot its potential,

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if it has any, and you'll learn through that process what the software is most useful for in your organization."

4. DO IT VIRALLY

Also at the core of BT's social media programs have been their lack of marketing. In most circumstances, the platform is created and made live, but then left to build through word-of-mouth. "It's the way social media works and you have to respect that," he says.

"The very success of social tools on the internet is down to individuals using a site, liking it, recommending it and growing it themselves in the way they want to. They won't be forced into using it, because the nature of the social media is how well they hook people into wanting to come back of their own free will. If you try to impose your will on it, it will fail."

Indeed, a big marketing campaign at launch will almost guarantee failure. "With most social software, it takes a while for the content to reach a critical enough mass for it to really start generating what you want. If you create a fanfare, you create an expectation. And if people visit it in that first week to find very little there yet, they may not go back again."

The other benefit of a low-key launch is you further eliminate both risk and the

"The benefit of a low-key launch is you further eliminate both risk and the likelihood of people baying for a demonstrable ROI."

Ross Chestney

BT

likelihood of people baying for a demonstrable ROI: "You buy yourself time for it to grow organically – as it should, as it has to with this kind of tool. And, if it doesn't take off at all, it's not going to be a disaster."

5. DO IT WARTS-AND-ALL

If you let users try the early versions, the benefits are numerous: You iron out kinks early; you succeed or fail quickly – and therefore cheaply; and you create a groundswell of "viral" enthusiasm as the site develops, improves and grows. And while it's still in its development stages, you take the pressure off – no-one will expect it to work perfectly.

"It gives you some leeway to have problems and glitches without a sense that 'this isn't worth persisting with' – employees understand it's only a trial," says Chestney. "I don't know how long something can remain a 'beta' site," he remarks, "but it's certainly a useful tag to use for as long as you can."

BT: The key principles of social media development

IBM**Developing a strategic mission for social media**

“The first step in building a social-media strategy is to recognize that it’s not for every company or every employee,” says Philippe Borremans, new media lead in Europe for IBM communications. “I can’t claim this is a natural fit for every company. It all stems from understanding what kind of company and culture you’re working in. But for us, it’s the right way to go.”

A COMPANY AT EASE WITH TECHNOLOGY

At IBM, it’s certainly a natural fit. “Big Blue” has an illustrious history of being at the forefront of technology-based corporate communication. From the multimedia brainstorming “WorldJam” that made news headlines back in 2001 – in which 50,000 employees worldwide joined in a real-time, online idea-sharing session about the company’s future direction, and which has been reprised in numerous similar “Jams” since – the company has set out its stall as one prepared to use breakthrough technologies to establish a two-way dialogue with its employees.

Little surprise, therefore, that in the last few years it has been recognized as being in the vanguard of social media use: IBM was one of the first Fortune 500 companies to get behind collaborative wikis, published internal blogging guidelines as far back as 2003, and is now moving fast beyond RSS and podcasts into videocasting and “virtual world” technologies like Second Life.

It would be wrong, says Borremans, to assume that this is simply a by-product of IBM being a leading-edge technology

company. “It helps, of course, but that’s not what it’s about,” he insists. It reflects the very way IBM does business, rather than the type of business it does: Increasingly less command-and-control, top-driven and hierarchical, it’s spent the last decade developing towards a consultancy model of business – with individuals moving fluidly across the organization and its structures. “It means that a more democratic concept of communication – with content driven and contributed from any level of the organization – is the right medium for us.”

STRUCTURING SOCIAL MEDIA

IBM’s strategic intent around social media has now been officially formalized. From January 2007, the company established a separate “new media” function within its corporate communication department (to sit alongside the other standard communication disciplines).

Headed up in Europe by Borremans, the team comprises seven communicators across various EU countries. Its remit: To act as expert consultants inside and outside IBM on issues relating to blogs, wikis, RSS and other social media applications.

STRATEGIC MISSION

“Our strategic mission is to educate, support and promote programs that utilize these tools,” says Borremans. “That might mean helping a project team of IBMers put together a wiki. It might be helping an executive add a podcast to his or her blog. Or it might be advising external clients on the best use of 3-D metaverses for their

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businesses” (see more about the 3-D web in Chapter 8, page 113).

In many ways, the very manner in which the function has developed reflects IBM’s overall strategic focus with social media since the turn of the millennium: organic, from the ground up, and responsive rather than enforced.

It’s an approach that was perhaps first exemplified by the company’s celebrated lead on blogging guidelines – coming out of a recognition that, like it or not, blogging was already happening among IBMers, just in an unregulated way.

EMPLOYEES ALREADY BLOGGING

“We knew our employees were blogging anyway, so we decided to try to put some structure around it,” he says. “It came as a response to what was already happening, rather than us pushing it. In a similar way, institutionalizing a function to deal specifically with new media is not a corporate “move”, or establishing something from scratch – it’s a response to the issues already emerging in the company. Now that those technologies are here, people are using them, they’re growing and therefore here to stay – we’re just going to put some structure around them so that we can try to optimize their use.”

KEEP SOCIAL MEDIA “SOCIAL”

Critics might question whether this is too reactive an approach to strategy – leaving the communication function always one step behind regulating what’s out there. Not at all, claims Borremans. It’s both necessary and a very function of the medium itself. It is, in fact, his second key lesson around the development of a social media strategy: Remember that it’s social.

“This is not something you can force,” he

“Your social media strategy must look unlike a traditional communication strategy. It’s not an enforced strategy – full of campaigns and ‘push’ models.”

Philippe Borremans
IBM

explains. “By its very nature, social media are organic, driven from below and democratic. The users decide what technologies they want to use and how they want to use them. You must always remember – and respect – the fact that social media are social. It’s as simple as that. Otherwise, it just won’t work.”

TAKE A HANDS-OFF APPROACH

Understanding this is crucial to the development of the strategy, says Borremans, and leads into his third rule of strategy: It’s more concerned with being guide than God.

“Your social media strategy must look unlike a traditional communication strategy. It’s not an enforced strategy – full of campaigns, ‘push’ models, restricting and mobilizing people – but a nurturing one, providing the platform and then support.” It’s less concerned, in other words, with commandments than facilitating the use of these technologies and then articulating where and how they might be used most effectively, building the parameters before they get stretched too far.

For this reason, the core focus of the new media strategy at IBM has been on putting together platforms and software for blogging, podcasting, wikis, etc. and then consulting with the groups using them to optimize their potential. It’s also why

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everything about the development of “new media” at IBM has been as a response to its being used already.

INTEGRATING WITH THE INTRANET

Despite the difference in strategic approach, social media has to a large extent been seamlessly integrated with other communication resources at IBM. For example, the intranet search facility extends to all areas of the site, including new media aspects. When an employee logs onto their portal and executes a key word search, the results they get back not only come from the “main” intranet pages (news, policy documents, etc.), but include results from IBM forums, wikis, blogs and podcast/videocast tags.

“So there isn’t a “separation of content’,” says Borremans. “It doesn’t matter where the content comes from, as long as it’s good content. That means not only is the new-media content on a par with everything else – which encourages both content providers and users to see it as such and treat it with respect – it also drives more people to those wikis and blogs that they might not previously have ventured into.”

SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOT FOR EVERYONE

Recognizing the social element; respecting the needs of the user; allowing them to shape the strategy and usage from the ground up. All of this brings us back full circle to Borremans’ original rule: Develop the right strategy for your kind of company. “We’re living in a world of flatter management structures, less command and control and more open decision making at the bottom of the organization,” he explains. “And IBM is certainly going that way.”

Once following a classic multinational model of business, IBM has been

refocusing the business over the last 10 years to something more along the lines of the “global integrated enterprise” – a networked organization, with the walls between business lines torn down and a fluid employee base who can operate across functions, sectors and geographies. “That means that social media must absolutely reflect where the company is going,” he continues. “If you look at it from the visual perspective, the ‘multinational’ is dozens of boxes or ‘departments’ operating in isolation, but mirroring each other’s work in each region. The corporate communication box for Europe sits under the same structure as the corporate communication box for North America.

THE NETWORKED ORGANIZATION

“But in the ‘networked organization’, we aim to be much more fluid, with thousands of independent people moving seamlessly in and out of various roles and areas of the business, all in a networked way. If you look at the blogosphere and the way it operates – interlinking, networked, inter-responsive, ever-changing – it perfectly mirrors that second model.”

But he’s keen to point to one glaring corollary of this: It may well not be right for your company. “You won’t hear me saying that every company needs to start using online social media” he explains, “because some companies are not ready for it. It may not be a good fit for their culture, or the industry they’re in might be very regulated.”

However, he’s quick to point out that this doesn’t sound the death knell. “It doesn’t mean you can’t use internal blogging. It’s simply that the implications are totally different – you have to have stricter guidelines, put more security in place and do a lot more monitoring.”



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A CHANGING WORKFORCE

Understanding the needs of the company in building a strategy, he adds finally, must also stretch to an acknowledgement of the demographic landscape. “The profile of the typical IBMer has changed drastically. For example, a few years ago, a large proportion of our workforce joined the company and stayed here their entire working lives. It’s just not like that any more. In Belgium, where I’m based, over 50% of our 2,300 employees have been here fewer than five years.”

FAMILIARITY WITH TOOLS

With an increasingly young and mobile

workforce, the likelihood is that an employee population full of a younger generation, for whom these tools are part and parcel of life, is not that far away.

“My 13-year-old daughter told me recently that she had created a web page. But when I looked at it, it’s actually a blog – she just doesn’t see it that way. In a few years, we’re going to be dealing with an employee base for whom blogging is just the natural way to interact over a web platform. That’s the kind of employee who’ll be making up our next generation of IBMers, and you’d be foolish to ignore it.”

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RICHARD DENNISON: Top tips for using web 2.0 technology

Based on experiences at BT, Richard Dennison, internal program manager, shares the following tips on gaining support for web 2.0 tools and technology, such as wikis:

- **Don’t position web 2.0 as something completely new.** People are instinctively fearful of radical change. We’ve altered our approach and positioned web 2.0 technology as an evolutionary step: “We’ve been doing this for years with e-mails, discussion forums and so on. This technology just makes it easier and faster to communicate and collaborate.”
- **Don’t get hung up on measurement.** Web 2.0 is about succeeding or failing fast and cheaply. If you have an idea, knock up a quick beta site and let it loose on the users. They’ll tell you if it’s any good or not, what needs changing and what needs adding. If it takes off, the users will write the business case for you. In most cases, with this technology you can instinctively feel if it’s the right thing to do.
- **Don’t focus on risks, focus on benefits.** We don’t allow anyone to publish into any of our web 2.0 tools anonymously. The ethos we are trying to engender is: “Say what you like, but you’ll be held accountable for what you say.” When we reviewed our security policies in the light of web 2.0 developments, we found that our existing policies already covered the potential risks associated with these new tools.

Richard Dennison, Internal Program Manager, BT
richard.dennison@bt.com

LEE BRYANT: Five things to remember when creating your strategy

To achieve the full benefits of what social media can offer, Lee Bryant, director of Headshift, a social software and networking consultancy, has five key caveats for those embarking on a new social media strategy.

1. Start small

“Some of the most obvious uses of social software are on projects and programs, which means it’s entirely sensible to begin at a small, local, team-based level,” he explains. The benefit this gives you is simple: The pressure is off, the feedback is clear and focused, and the cost and risk of roll-out is minimal. “So you start with simple, small, cheap localized tools that work with individuals and groups, and then you aggregate upwards and outwards later to get the scale and the network effects at an enterprisewide level. On the plus side, you get real, direct and focused impact in improving communication within those target groups. And even if they don’t work, there’s no down side because there’s no real damage done.”

Furthermore, it allows for differential development depending on each group’s needs. “Those old IT systems failed because they were rolled out as one, monolithic system rather than a collection of little ones, which doesn’t tend to suit how people work. By starting small, you can allow each little group to develop it in the way that suits their specific needs best – and you’ll reap the rewards of that later.”

2. A blended solution is best

There’s a temptation, when hearing about the potential of a tool, to want to implement it instantly across the organization. For Bryant, this is an error, as it fails to understand the contrasting needs of audiences. “Different social software applications, like anything else, work for some organizations and not others,” he explains. “But similarly, different tools work in different ways for different teams and individuals even within the company. So pretty much all successful applications of social tools in organizations are, in fact, a blend.”

Typically, he says, that blend will include social tagging and “tail rank” systems (human-generated tags and amalgamations of content that help users find the most relevant content), as well as a social networking element. “But the particular blend you need will depend on the culture and on the specific information or interaction needs of the particular groups. So it’s best to start out with a wide-ranging and diverse toolkit on a few trial groups and then streamline as you go forward. The low cost of these applications allows you to do that, and it’s definitely to be recommended as it will always lead to a better result – an end to shoe-horning people into the applications you’re willing to provide, and more allowing the right tools for the right people to emerge.”

3. Base the blend on specific uses

When working on the blend you will offer in the first place, work closely with your pilot groups. “Social media is social, so you need to start by involving the users in the initial development,” he says. Brainstorm with your project groups on what they need, what tools are available, and which would help them overcome typical barriers in their workload.

“Work with individual groups within the organization and do a basic needs analysis,” he explains. “Next, use that intelligence to create scenarios that help to determine the suite of tools that will best fit their needs. Then you can build a simple interface for them that looks and feels like it belongs to them. That brings them in from the outset and means you’re much more likely to kick-off with a “bang” than a “whimper” – a spike of usage, rather than drawn-out efforts to get people to start using them.”

4. Focus on the human, not the technological

There’s a tendency to see these as IT systems that people use, rather than as people systems that IT facilitates. “All social software is founded on a non-IT social system that human beings use anyway,” says Bryant. “Social media merely allows the interaction to happen over a technology platform instead. In order to encourage that

move over to a systems-based approach to the communication, therefore, people need to feel that they, not the technology, are the center of the system. So it's always important to encourage informal contacts, informal networking and a tone of voice that feels much more personal than traditional corporate communication."

5. Get comfortable with ambiguity

One of the most important aspects of social software – which is almost their primary appeal and the thing that makes them work for the user – is that they are random and unpredictable. "That means that you can never predict the outcome of these projects in their entirety," he warns. "So you have to be comfortable with a degree of uncertainty. That's one of the great lessons of the rise of the blogosphere – simple, person-to-person conversations can blossom into quite large exercises in knowledge sharing if they're allowed to grow in whatever way they need."

That doesn't mean that you can't have a strategy, he is at pains to point out. "Far from it," he says. "These things can still be very business-focused if you design them to address a concrete business issue, like the need to collaborate on a project or the need to get feedback from field staff." But it does mean that the strategy is more about guidance than dogmatic instruction – establishing the parameters of the conversation (e.g., the need for project collaboration), rather than trying to control the conversations themselves.

"You need to focus on creating the conditions for communication to emerge from these systems. But then what you are trying to do is unleash energy within the social network – and that's unpredictable. You can lay down the parameters within which that energy will emerge, you can even establish some broad guidance. What you can't do is regulate that energy entirely. Because if you control it too tightly at too early a stage, you will basically kill it off."

Bryant points to the general failure of marketing agencies – despite much talk – to create successful viral campaigns as an example of this. "They've tried endlessly to create fake viral behavior, to surface wild interest and thousands of responses without the audience realizing. But for the most part, it doesn't work." All you can do is start out with some goals in mind, he says. You can try to create "attractors" that move you towards that goal, but then you need to step away and let it happen as it will. "You can't plan these initiatives in advance, saying, "We're going to have a companywide discussion about profitability and we will start it here, here and here and make it spread virally." It just doesn't work. Instead, you need to create the conditions, create the culture of openness and debate, but then allow the natural voices in your network to let it spread."

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HELEN LOVE: Staying ahead of the hype

One of the biggest critics of the “social media bandwagon” comes from an unlikely background. Helen Love, now an independent consultant, was until April 2007 Microsoft UK’s internal communication manager. Yet, despite working for one of the most high-profile technology organizations in the world, she remains unconvinced that the revolution has begun.

“New media won’t suit every person, or every organization – in the same way that traditional media aren’t a fit for everyone,” she explains. “In all the hype about social tools, it’s easy to lose sight of that. It’s not the be-all and end-all.”

Just another part of the mix

For Love, new media is just another part of the mix and she feels that, in some circles, this is being missed. In the excitement over what social media can do, it’s being treated as a replacement to what is currently being used – whereas she feels it’s merely another component in the suite of tools. “There are areas where it works well. New media is often exceptionally useful with remote workforces. If you can harness it properly, blogs and wikis are often a great way to pull those people into a community. But it’s not a ‘solution’ and it doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It’s complementary to traditional communication channels – another tool in the armory.”

Love is also concerned that the fuss generated by social media is obscuring the profession from what’s important. “I think one of the things we have to keep remembering as internal communicators is that, at the end of the day, it’s about the message, not the delivery mechanism. If the message is not relevant, it doesn’t matter how you’re delivering it, it’s not going to have any impact. We shouldn’t let the potential of social tools make us take our eye off the ball.”

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American Electric Power

Integrating an employee collaboration area on the intranet

When American Electric Power (AEP) redesigned its corporate intranet in 2006, a conscious effort was made to introduce new features devoted to employee interaction. William Amurgis, manager of intranet strategy, describes the evolution.

To me, the true value of a website comes not from the availability of information, but from the immediate connections it permits between people – particularly those separated by distance.

Unfortunately, some communicators are taught to control the message and fear such interaction, since it might lead to public criticism and dissent. But by making some minor compromises and instituting safeguards, AEP was able to manage these fears and launch the new interactive features to wide acceptance.

WE'VE COME A LONG WAY

Before explaining our approach, let's review the evolution of interaction on corporate intranets:

- **Top-down:** in this traditional form, the message is crafted by or on behalf of corporate leaders and broadcast to the rest of the company, as a one-way conversation. Most intranets start out this way.
- **Bottom-up:** although the original message in this form may still be delivered in a top-down manner, comments and reactions from employees are actively solicited. We implemented bottom-up interaction several years ago, attaching a comment

box below every online news story to encourage employees to read and react – anonymously, if preferred. This helped our news editors gauge the pulse of the organization. But the comments were seen only by those who crafted the original message – a two-way conversation.

- **Side-to-side:** higher up the evolutionary chain, employee perspectives, ideas and reactions are actively solicited and posted live on the intranet for other employees to see and consider. Further reactions ensue, making this a many-to-many conversation. Our redesign focused on these side-to-side interactions.

ENCOURAGING COLLABORATION

In establishing our new interactive features, we created a special area on our intranet devoted to employee collaboration called The Agora (see Figure 1.3, next page). It includes:

- A weekly multiple-choice poll, enabling employees to quickly register their opinions on company or societal issues.
- A weekly discussion with a carefully chosen topic of broad appeal, soliciting employee perspectives and ideas, in full text.
- An online thank-you card application, so employees can thank their colleagues (privately or publicly) for a job well done.
- An online marketplace where employees can sell cars, furniture and other items to one another.

A COMPROMISE FOR LOSS OF CONTROL

The key compromise for us was to prohibit anonymity within these interactive

American Electric Power: Integrating an employee collaboration area on the intranet



elements. We automatically sense each employee's identity (determined from login credentials for our corporate computer network), and tag any comment with the employee's name. Employees realize that they'll be held accountable for their comments and keep the rhetoric at a professional level. We still see some criticism and dissent, which is good, but nothing offensive.

Also, we list clear guidelines, spelling out the consequences of unacceptable behavior. Those who betray the guidelines have their contributions swiftly removed, and repeat offenders lose the ability to contribute further.

Finally, we have an early-warning system to notify the caretakers of the intranet when a new contribution is submitted. I receive an e-mail (delivered at all hours to my mobile device) with the full text of any comments, and I can delete any questionable items with the press of a button.

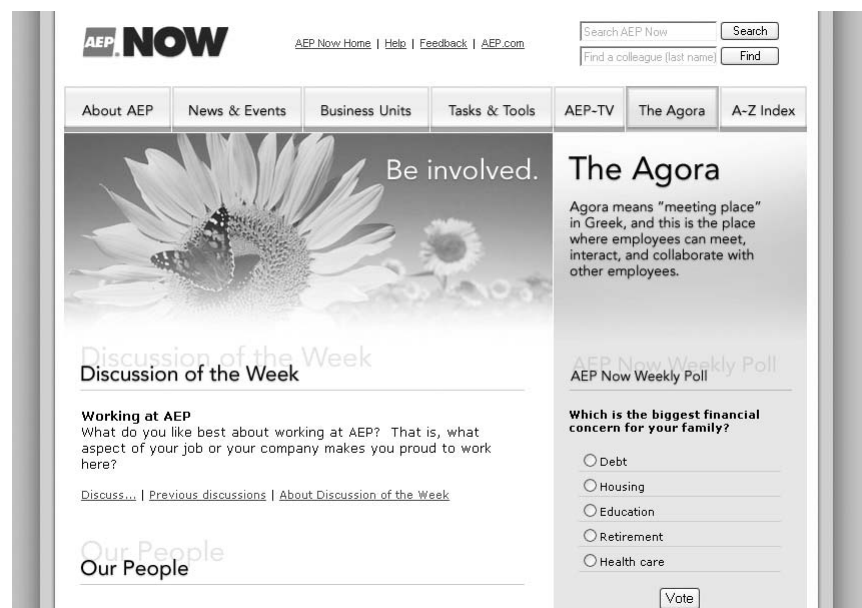
WHERE IS THE BUSINESS VALUE?

Some of these interactive offerings may seem simple and frivolous. However, the online marketplace is proving immensely popular with our employees, and by positioning it near the bottom of our collaboration area, it attracts attention to the other, more valuable offerings.

It also gets employees into the habit of sharing and exchanging. Later, when we more vigorously promote discussion, or introduce more blogs and live chats, or encourage knowledge exchange, the culture will hopefully be more receptive.

So, despite the fears, our employees have rewarded our trust by actively participating in wide-ranging online conversations and by maintaining the proper decorum. We've lost some control, but gained new voices, making our intranet even more vibrant.

Fig 1.3: AEP's collaboration area, The Agora



American Electric Power: Integrating an employee collaboration area on the intranet

Nortel

Involving employees in the communication process

Not every aspect of encouraging social platforms has to be about elaborate technologies and cost outlays. Sometimes, it's just a matter of applying its principles to your existing platforms in the simplest way. At telecoms giant Nortel, as well as the "bells and whistles" new media, the company has gained real traction by turning over the company news on the intranet to employees.

TOP TIP: ENCOURAGE EMPLOYEES TO WRITE THEIR OWN NEWS

The site hosts an online publication, used to report news to employees on various aspects of the business. "Traditionally that content has come out of writers within the communication group," says Memsy Price, employee and sales communication manager at Nortel. "What we've started to do instead is deploy working-level employees as 'stringers' – 'Our reporter in New York' and so on – to contribute content from their side of the business. It was a way to empower them and draw them in, and keep the news in a tone that others would relate to."

FANTASTIC RESPONSE

The response from employees – both as writers and readers – has been fantastic. According to Michele Murray, director of corporate strategic programs, "The stories that we post at the moment with that tone and format tend to get far better readership than the other, typically drier

material we put up – a repurposed press release, or a Q&A on strategy."

It also capitalizes on features of social media and blogging – opinion-based, personal, diary accounts of thoughts and impressions – with which employees are becoming increasingly comfortable as writers. And it allows a way to bring some of the precepts of social media into more formal online vehicles. "We like to think of it as a way of engaging employees with 'side-to-side communication' rather than top-down – so the message is going from employee to employee rather than management to employee," explains Price.

PERSONAL JOURNEY

One feature recently run in the publication came from a conference for "emerging leaders" in Nortel. The communication group asked three attendees to file back stories on their experiences – interviewing other attendees and offering their thoughts and opinions on presentations and proceedings. "It was really like a personal journal – 'Day 1: Stuck in Chicago but the coffee tastes good' and so on," explains Price. "But that meant that reporting on the content of the event was that much more 'real' to the reader, so it's allowed us to capture that blog tone in our traditional vehicles.

"None of the messages are lost, they're just delivered in a more personal way. And that, to me, is one of the really exciting things about social media: the democratization of content."

Nortel: Involving employees in the communication process

JOYCE LEWIS: Harnessing the potential of the web

“One problem for professional communicators is that the web is still fairly new. It’s only been around for about 10 years and it’s only in the last five years perhaps that communicators have been able to get their hands on websites that make an impact,” says Joyce Lewis, marketing and communications manager for the Electronics and Computer Science (ECS) school at the University of Southampton.

“It’s still fairly radical for communicators to think of the web as a completely different entity, rather than just another publishing medium – the fact that we still talk about ‘Writing killer content for your website’ shows that.”

Envision the future

For Lewis, it’s not communicators’ fault, but rather a problem that goes much further and deeper – a lack of ability across the global population to envision a future for the internet outside the boundaries of what they already know. “I don’t think the world in general has got close to fully exploring what the web can do yet,” she explains. “There’s still a whole world we don’t know.”

Constrained by experience

In Lewis’ opinion, we’re constrained by our experiences and so simply put most computer technology to use as “modern” versions of old things – Microsoft Word as a new typewriter; Wikipedia as an online encyclopedia. “That’s why, until now, the web has just been used to store and share text. But there could be a wealth of things it could do, if we didn’t see it quite so two-dimensionally. When you think about how much it has already developed, it could be that the web in 10 years time will be a totally different beast, doing totally different things – and being used in a way that we just can’t imagine now.”

The boom of online video

As far as Lewis is concerned, the whole conversation could be different, and the boom of online video that we’ve seen over the last couple of years – turning the provision of information on the internet into a visual communication rather than a textual one – is just one part of that. “It’s quicker to view, it’s more appealing, it’s emotionally rich, and most people’s bandwidth can now support it. So it’s definitely one way the web is going” (for more about the use of online video at ECS, turn to the case study on page 77).

Emotionally rich experience

“I don’t think the web is a method for telling people things in the way you can with print,” she says, “because there’s just too much of it. With a magazine, the print entity sits alone in their hands: ‘Read this, it’s all there is.’

“With the web, you’re inviting people into a world packed with more interesting things than they could possibly imagine, and where they’re only one click away from leaving your site and entering a whole other world. That explains a lot about people’s interactions with the web – it has to be short, it has to be direct, because otherwise they’ll be gone. So you can’t write long lectures on the web – but you can show and exemplify things and you can give them a much more emotionally rich experience.”

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Scottish & Newcastle

Paving the way for a social media approach

It's one thing to implement elaborate social software tools when you're a technology multinational and its part-and-parcel of your core culture and service offering. It's another when you're a manufacturing organization, with a large part of your workforce in operational roles away from desks, where simply getting more people to use intranet kiosks is a challenge.

But there are still ways to encourage more participation and engagement with employees using existing technology platforms. At Scottish & Newcastle (S&N), one of the world's leading beer-led beverage companies, they've tried to import the concepts of social media into their core vehicles. It's a salutary reminder for those who feel social media is a step too far, that its key principles can still be adapted.

GETTING A DEBATE GOING

One part of this move has been to put a vox pop question up on the intranet regularly. The "Big Debate" question poses broad-ranging and challenging questions to employees – "How 'green' are we?" was one that proved popular recently. Readers can click beside the question and register their views and opinions. The responses are moderated before being posted on a separate page of the site – a form of "have your say" across the company.

"We state up front that the questions will be moderated, to ensure no offensive remarks

are made," comments Jackie Trousdale, group web and internal communications manager. "But we also don't require any registration to post a comment, which gives people freedom to say what they really feel."

INVOLVING EMPLOYEES IN VIDEO

Scottish & Newcastle is also exploring ways to engage employees through online video. Since 2000, the company has grown through a number of acquisitions and one of the challenges for the organization is to foster a "one team" culture. One step toward this has been to create a video "newsletter", a distributed CD made "by the people, for the people."

Comprising four-minute features presented by S&N employees, the 10-minute CD is distributed annually to all teams across the company. "Our people are spread across more than 15 countries, including UK, Russia and the US, so it really helps bring people together and make them feel part of the bigger team," she says.

MORE PERSONAL CONTENT

"We try to take a more personal, low-key view to the content. Our people can suggest current topics that they think will be of interest, and someone relevant to the subject will be asked if they'd like to present. Our executives don't mind putting in an appearance, particularly our CEO, who is keen to use this channel as a way for all employees to hear from him directly – with a bit of self parody when required."

Scottish & Newcastle: Paving the way for a social media approach

