

SelectMinds Abstract for CSCW 2008 Workshop: Social Networking in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Large companies interested in taking advantage of the perceived benefits of social networking applications typically balance a number of competing priorities. These include: the enthusiasm for enhanced engagement among important constituencies against organizational fear of unmonitored constituent interaction; the technology required to adapt to a range of risk-averse environments; and the initiative to grow and nurture a community against other internal obligations. Additionally, the large enterprise is typically interested in networking multiple constituencies for multiple business benefits, and controlling the nature of the constituencies' interactions.

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Social networking, social media, organizational management

INTRODUCTION

Large companies are increasingly interested in deriving the benefits of social media (1). SelectMinds develops, deploys, and manages social media applications—specifically including basic social networking functionality—for a number of large companies, including BearingPoint, Deloitte, Dow Chemical, and IBM. In developing and deploying our applications for the enterprise, we've become familiar with some of the competing organizational forces that impact application design and deployment. Some of the typical negotiations we encounter are: 1) balancing end-user and evangelist attitudes, which tend toward enthusiasm for unfettered access and communications with other users, with the risk-averse nature of the administrators who are purchasing or running the application for the client; 2) the capabilities of the application to address a range of scenarios relative to the risk-aversion of the client, and to adjust over time to the client's (typically) relaxing attitude toward social media; 3) the human investment at the client site required to plan and nurture online communities relative to the client's business goals against the ongoing competition for resources in the enterprise. Below I will offer brief specifics on these points, which I can further

elucidate in the workshop format with specific anecdotes of SelectMinds experience with clients.

As a secondary subject of interest, SelectMinds has experience working with clients to plan and implement social media applications for multiple constituencies that may be business priority for a client, such as employees, company alumni, retirees, and VIPs, and ensuring the client-appropriate interaction of those constituencies in a single social system.

BALANCING END-USER AND EVANGELIST ENTHUSIASM WITH CLIENT-ADMIN RISK AVERSION

It is often the case that a client's interest in social media is driven either by end-user demand, an evangelist at the client, or a combination of both. This attitude of enthusiasm is typically driven by some of the following factors:

- The use of consumer social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn and the desire to replicate the social-networking and collaboration of those applications in an organizational context. Clients have said this is especially true of college graduates who join the workforce and are surprised to find their employers do not offer such services to employees.
- Frustration with knowledge-management and portal solutions, which tend to make the more lightweight consumer apps mentioned above more appealing and spawn requests for such capabilities in the organization
- The existence of unofficial, special-purpose social media offerings created by individuals to serve the end-user demand for social networking and collaboration. The popularity of these offerings often drive a client to offer an "official" alternative.

However, counterbalancing the grass-roots enthusiasm for social media and social networking is the risk-averse nature of most large corporations. There are many specific ways this risk aversion may manifest, but some of them are:

- Fear of breaking down silos. Direct collaboration tools and social-network capability tend to run

counter the natural inclination of organizations toward a command-and-control structure. The very ability to see a list of friends, which does not necessarily correspond to an org chart, has prompted apprehension with some clients.

- The fear of inappropriate behavior. Horror stories of teenagers running amok on MySpace and Facebook have a very real chilling effect on the enthusiasm for social networking in the enterprise, due to both the natural desire to ensure decorum in the workplace as well as the very real concern of legally actionable behavior of one user toward another.
- Fear of users' social perceptions of social networks. Several clients have been very concerned regarding end-user perception of social network visualizations (for instance, "Bob accepted Todd's connection invite, but not mine") having a negative impact on morale and productivity.

Each client engagement is different, but we have found some of the following things to be helpful in mitigating concerns of clients toward the use of social media.

- Emphasizing how social networking and social media allow clients to achieve business goals, such as increasing communication across geographies, or attracting alumni to return
- Emphasizing how social networking specifically engages users and drives usage (clients with social networking enabled typically have far higher usage than those that do not)
- The steps taken at the application level to address a range of concerns (about which more below)

ADDRESSING A RANGE OF RISK-AVERSION ATTITUDES VIA THE TECHNOLOGY

Each large enterprise will have a different attitude of risk-aversion toward social media. This can run the gamut from a desire for substantial control, to comfort with self-policing and active monitoring. We have never encountered a client that is comfortable with the anything-goes world of MySpace for Facebook.

In order to sell into a range of attitudes at the enterprise, therefore, the technology must accommodate a range of controls on user behavior and administrative monitoring. These include, but are not limited to:

- Controls on pre-approval for user-generated content
- Controls on abusive language in the application
- Controls on repetitive and potentially abusive behavior

- Controls on access to content, users, and social networking features

It is interesting to note that our experience with large organizations is also one where the client's interest in control tends to lessen over time, due both to a general relaxation of attitude, in addition to the resources necessary to more aggressively moderate a social media application.

HUMAN INVESTMENT IN SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL SOFTWARE IN A RESOURCE-CONSTRAINED ENVIRONMENT

A final balance to be struck with the typical large-scale organization is the work necessary to create a thriving social environment against the natural constraints on one's time at work.

It has been noted elsewhere that active nurturing of participation in social systems begets increasing end-user engagement (2), and this has been our experience as well: the clients who devote one or several people to driving usage (by submitting content, by seeding and encouraging forum discussions, by sending digest email updates) see far more traffic than our clients who devote fewer resources.

SOCIAL NETWORKING APPLICATIONS FOR DIVERSE CONSTITUENCIES

As a final point of interest, it has been our experience that large corporations tend to approach social media from a business-benefit standpoint. The specific business benefit being pursued tends to suggest the constituencies of the social networking app in order to derive that benefit. Some of the typical constituency/business-benefit of our clients are:

Employees

Enhanced productivity and innovation via collaboration and denser relationships from social networking.

Alumni

Faster and cheaper recruitment via engaging former employees via the social network.

Retirees

Administrative access to departed expertise and contract workforce via the social network.

VIPs

High-touch service to VIPs (managing directors, retired partners, etc) for a variety of business goals.

Multi-Constituency Social Networks

Some of our more forward-thinking clients are combining populations, such as employees and retirees, in a single network, for goals including employee access to departed expertise for productivity and innovation. The issues of control and appropriate interaction of these internal / external audiences is a particularly interesting challenge which I can further address in the workshop.

CONCLUSION

As the enterprise increasingly embraces social media and social networking for its multiple constituencies and business goals, industry and academia should be aware of the balance to be struck between the openness that nurtures such systems and the natural risk-aversion typical to corporations. Technology and services that accommodate these competing priorities, and adapt to changing attitudes over time, will be well placed to take advantage of the corporate move into social media. Further, vendors should be able to balance multiple constituencies that must be

serviced relative to a client's business goals. I look forward to sharing specific client experiences, and discussing these issues and related items in the Social Networking in Organizations workshop.

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