



Knowledge Sharing and Collaboration Meet in Social Networks

Innovative businesses have active social networks that the entire organization can utilize. It is a system that promotes the free flow of innovation-producing knowledge.

Unplanned interactions can produce the greatest results - innovative ideas emerging from shared knowledge. The careful blending and balancing of formal and informal processes can produce outstanding results in a business environment where multiple generations and diverse people are trying to figure out how to communicate and knowledge share despite having different communication styles. That is one of the little recognized advantages of social media – its ability to bring together people who communicate in different ways and have different perspectives.

In fact, a variety of research efforts have shown that knowledge flow comes more from network relationships than from corporate leadership, in a sign of the times. Top down influence works well, but top down directives through silo organizations are ineffective in widely dispersed, global, diverse, competitive businesses today. Staying innovative is more about the sharing of expertise, knowledge, ideas, and perspectives so participation in the social networks should take place within a knowledge sharing culture. This is a far cry from compliance based communication which is not based on collaboration and participation.

Taking Ownership of the Social Network

One of life's mysteries for some leaders is how to get employees to fully utilize social media in a way that achieves desired results. Installing an intranet or web-based social media program, and ordering employees to start collaborating on it may seem like the shortest route to getting their attention, but it is quite likely an ineffective approach. It is better to let people use technology in different ways and according to their personal style within the context of their organizational role, leading to them taking ownership of the social media and their role in the social network. One of the advantages of using this flexible approach is that people are more likely to communicate because there is less fear of doing or saying something that is culturally out-of-place, thus diversity and inclusion policies are supported.

It is challenging to leverage social media as a collaborative and knowledge sharing tool because social media is organic and creative, and is often based in informal chatting. Even social media that is structured for purposes like team work on a project is designed to encourage people to share thoughts, "what-ifs" and the knowledge accumulated through training and experience. In the formative years of business social media, organizations pushed information out to workforce using technologies like intranets. The business, in effect, kept doing what it had always done as far as pushing or sharing knowledge, except now it patted itself on the back for making use of new technology.

As John Maynard Keynes said, "The real difficulty...lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping from the old ones." How does an organization get past narrow minded thinking and the old way of doing things? Social media is a tool that can create new knowledge through collaboration and that



knowledge should flow through the business. That is why innovative businesses creating value develop high levels of engagement in a collaborative culture. Social media is an uber collaborative technology if its full power is leveraged to encourage the kind of social connections that promote personal development and the ability to find, evaluate and create information. This is the same as saying that social media, despite its organic nature, needs strategy and governance to take advantage of its greatest opportunities in areas of collaboration, talent management, and employee engagement.

Get the Culture Right

It is tempting to say the first step in leveraging social media is to do something with social media like add new technologies. That approach will not necessarily get desired results because adding more to a business environment filled with barriers to collaboration is not going to produce social media results. Leadership must get the organizational culture right by focusing on collaboration rather than competition. A culture that is not amenable to collaboration will drive people to find their own means of sharing knowledge and that is likely to be outside the business on personal social media sites, excluding leadership.

There are numerous strategies companies use to create a collaborative culture. Some involve simple activities like celebrating knowledge sharing in webinars or leadership blogs. Managers can support virtual Employee Resource Groups, develop an employee-centric Human Resources operation, and communicate with employees through social media, and all actions should happen across the organization, even if it is dispersed around the globe. Maybe not so obvious is the championing of diversity because it says that different perspectives are encouraged and embraced. The same is true about championing a multigenerational workforce in which groups of people view the collaborative process and the role of social media as a knowledge sharing tool differently.

Leaders must ask themselves if employees are skilled in dealing with the flow of information and if there is ample opportunity to share information. Global companies cannot have large groups of employees unable to access social media if the business is going to fully engage the workforce. Leveraging social media to strengthen knowledge sharing may require implementing a variety of communication channels and collaboration technologies. The company may want to introduce crowd-sourcing of ideas, project teams connected via social media, cross-culture and cross-generation social-media based ERGs, and so on.

HP added collaborative technologies that included a webpage that has links to forums, blogs, and teams in HP; an online document repository; an online discussion forum; and a blog where employees across the company can post their ideas and comments. HP also created a brand around its collaborative technologies with logos that say, "I Know." Businesses serious about leveraging social media may add a knowledge manager or designate ambassadors to moderate the virtual collaboration process.

Leveraging social media for knowledge sharing requires creating a culture of trust and open communication first. The social media technologies can successfully present the opportunities for producing innovation, but people will only use them if comfortable sharing information. Look at the



big social networking picture and not just the technology. A successful knowledge sharing system has many components, including culture, people, and technologies.