

News

From Knowledge Stocks to Federated Streams

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Hidden pools of knowledge lie dormant in your organisation. Social software can channel the torrents of information that cut across organisational boundaries and drive rapid performance improvement.

If only we only knew what we know. It is an old adage about enterprise knowledge management. Companies are sitting on a treasure trove of knowledge that could be tapped to solve complex challenges, if only they knew who had it.

Early-generation software tools concentrated on stocks of knowledge—what you know at any point in time. But what if you could access streams of knowledge that pull expertise toward you when you need it, from wherever it resides.

Here is an even more radical thought experiment: What if you didn't use e-mail to do it?

Organisations across the spectrum are ditching the information silos of e-mail and using enterprise social software that “streams” conversations inside the company firewall. At its best, social software can work like a self-organising knowledge management system.

If you have ever used Twitter or Facebook, you have probably experienced the serendipity of discovering information you never would have learned otherwise from the constant stream of postings. Social software like Socialcast applies the same idea to companies, helping employees share what they are working on with each other through “activity streams” that are more secure than public social networking platforms. (Security is of course a relative concept, representing a spectrum of security rather than a binary state. Given this, every company needs to assess the degree of security offered relative to the sensitivity of the information and data being exchanged.)

“You can open the stream wide open and try to drink from the company fire hose,” says Tim Young, founder and CEO of Socialcast. “Or you can whittle it down to just the 10 people within your group.”

With Socialcast, employees form groups around common interests, roles, geographic regions, or communities of practice. A host of analytic and management tools help people shape and learn from the streams headed their way. Employees can follow and rate people's updates and filter posts by topic and keyword. Posts are organised around topics of conversation, and relevant expertise is archived for everyone to see, unlike the siloed information that is often hidden from others in e-mail.

The use of enterprise social software inside companies is spreading rapidly, most often driven by demand from nontechnical line management all the way up to C-suite executives rather than from the IT organisation. Gartner predicts that by 2012, more than half of companies will use some form of activity stream like microblogging, and that social networks could replace e-mail for 20 percent of corporate communication.

One prominent media company now has more than 200 employees on a Socialcast network. It needed to find a way to collaborate and share the knowledge that resides within many divisions around the world. Many employees felt disconnected from headquarters, and they wanted to share solutions to problems that employees everywhere could learn from.

For instance, an employee in charge of graphics production in one European city recently needed access to a “render farm,” a cluster of high-speed image-processing computers for visual effects. She sent out an e-mail to someone in her division, which was forwarded around her own office before it jumped across the ocean, was routed down the chain of command, and finally found the right specialist on a different continent who could help. The process took six days.

If only she had known about a small experiment with Socialcast already going on inside the company. She would have been able to see that a month before, an employee had offered to share unused rendering capacity at night in one continent with people in other time zones. What had taken six days of e-mailing could have been answered instantly and the work completed in a significantly shorter period of time.

From Stocks to Flows

Many marketing departments have discovered the virtues of connecting with consumers using social software to gain a real-time view of customer wants and needs. Companies are increasingly leveraging these tools internally to accelerate communication and collaboration, as we have shown.

But there is much more that companies can accomplish. Social software can provide a platform for scaling and amplifying the powerful knowledge flows that happen both inside and outside a company.

It used to be that companies could rely on “stocks” of knowledge. In more stable times, managers could sit back and relax once they had learned something valuable, secure that they could generate value from that knowledge for an indefinite period. As product lifecycles compress, knowledge stocks depreciate at an accelerating rate. Companies must continually refresh them through relevant “flows” of knowledge — interactions that create knowledge or transfer it across individuals.

Many companies wrestle with the challenges of expanding knowledge flows within siloed organisations, but confront even greater difficulties when reaching out beyond the four walls of their enterprise. Even when they are successful, companies tend to concentrate on flows involving transfers of existing knowledge rather than creation of new knowledge.

One of the consequences of the increasing importance of knowledge flows in the Big Shift is that tacit, rather than explicit, knowledge is increasingly important in business. Tacit knowledge is that hard-to-acquire form of learning by doing. But tacit knowledge resides in people who may be scattered across departments and locations. No company directory is going to help you find the tacit knowledge you need.

Activity streams begin to accumulate tacit knowledge flows as people develop reputations within social networks and form relationships around shared interests and needs. Activity streams in fact serve as catalysts for content serendipity—discovering a news item about something that you were not aware of. Over time, they become even more important catalysts for people serendipity—discovering individuals inside and outside organisations who are engaged in relevant pursuits. People find each other and build trust-based relationships, which helps them access deeper forms of tacit knowledge.

As companies generate richer knowledge flows, something interesting begins to happen. People across different companies begin to come together to launch sustained collaborative initiatives. Streams now become torrents as participants realise the power of social software tools to convene a relevant set of highly motivated and diverse people to drive performance to new levels.

Delivering Business Value From Social Software

Social software can not only create and spread knowledge, but it can also increase business value. Smart companies are:

Unlocking New Metrics. Social software increasingly offers powerful network analysis tools that allow leaders to see who is influencing whom across the organisation chart. These metrics show the hidden relationships between people, rather than the rigid hierarchies, that increasingly define how work really gets done. Individual participants can use social software tools to create personalised dashboards, helping them pull out the information most relevant to them.

Developing Talent. Social software can identify emerging leaders who have a knack for connecting and amplifying knowledge exchange. Management can also monitor in real-time the kinds of information and resources employees find useful in getting their jobs done. Activity streams

become an increasingly important part of the work environment and help participants get better faster by connecting with each other in much more flexible ways around challenging performance issues.

Leveraging Technology Investments. Companies can also use social software to maximize their existing investments in enterprise software. With an additional social layer to help people solve problems among themselves, companies can add order of magnitude greater value to CRM, ERP, and content management systems.

So far so good. But even more business value can be generated—if companies begin to break out of their walled gardens.

An unfortunate digital divide is emerging between the streamed platforms outside the enterprise and the streamed platforms within the enterprise. Some of the most valuable knowledge flows are actually across enterprises. By focusing only on social software inside companies, we're at risk of creating "stream silos" in which employees can get rich knowledge within the four walls of their company, but are blocked from connecting with the tacit knowledge of other people who matter, such as suppliers and business partners.

Future innovation is needed to build and deploy what we call "federated streams" that can cut across enterprise boundaries, while also protecting confidential and proprietary data. Once we can tap into the power of federated streams across companies, we can unlock the true potential of social software.

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