The Latest Wave in Today's Communications Revolution

Decades ago in business communications, we saw the telegraph replaced by facsimile (fax) machines, which have been for the most part overtaken by email. Today, we're again at the crossroads of another new wave in the evolution of communications with the emergence of social media. Applied in tandem with email, social media have become highly innovative hybrid productivity tools that are helping to support new collaborative enterprises.

The social media giant Facebook currently has 901 million active users and the average user spends 20 minutes on the site per visit, according to the 2012 report of Facebook User Statistics. However, for some human resources practitioners and line supervisors, Facebook as well as other social network tools like Twitter, Google+, Weibo and Renren, etc., are distractions that would harm company efficiency and productivity if their staff access these sites during office hours.

Despite this thinking, social networking is an undeniably popular trend that has already affected the lifestyles and communication patterns of millions of people around the world. This is especially true for 'Gen-Yers' who are now well versed in today's sharing and transparent culture across the digital realm. For this reason, human resource professionals should not try to block but rather embrace and leverage the powerful social media to optimise workforce efficiency and engage employees in an innovative, transparent and positive manner.

It isn't only about setting up an online platform to facilitate communications with potential customers or handling other marketing and promotional needs. Rather it can be uniquely utilised from an HR communications perspective. By transforming the organisation to a social business, one can apply the user-friendly, highly interactive platforms featuring user-generated content, which is regarded as the catalyst for the rapid growth of social networking. Indeed, it marks the new era of the intranet.

"Social networking can offer unlimited ways to connect and interact with your internal target groups, eventually leading to speedier and more flexible solutions for them," says Ted Stanton, industry solutions executive consultant for the IBM Software Group. "Beyond external communications, social media has also made an impact on HR functions as well affecting activities from staff recruitment and retention to full engagement."

Easy Access to the Right Talents

These days when there is a work position open, HR departments can place job postings on the intranet for possible referrals as well as to attract internal applications. With the help of social networking technologies, HR professionals can now take a more proactive stance in staff recruitment. "Every employee of our organisation is assigned a dedicated profile page which lists his or her brief personal background, contact details and success factors, ranging from career goals, language skills, and functional expertise all the way to leadership experience," says Mr. Stanton. "The data that is now accessible and searchable for the HR department have become a valuable part of our overall talent management system."

Locating talent globally is achieved easily and efficiently. "This social platform enables HR practitioners to identify key prospects and spot expertise across geographic boundaries," he adds. "It's particularly efficient for global corporations since their offices and staff teams are widely distributed across different territories."

Taking IBM as an example, Mr. Stanton says that his company's employees are encouraged to carry out better career planning development with a CareerSmart Program, which consists of software that allows staff to share their expertise assessments,

Ted Stanton, industry solutions executive consultant for the IBM Software Group

resumes, and PBC (Personal Business Commitment) business goals in the dedicated platform. It's a more effective way to rethink and refine their career prospects over and over.

Participating in Online Communities

Today, hundreds of internal and external communities have been established in IBM for instant employee communications and global collaboration via virtual platforms. Among these is New2Blue (Big Blue is the nickname of IBM) which is tailor-made for those who are new to IBM. "This community aims to provide a platform for new employees, allowing them to interact with each other as well as with subject matter experts in a self-service community," says Mr. Stanton. "They can also gain access to more senior and experien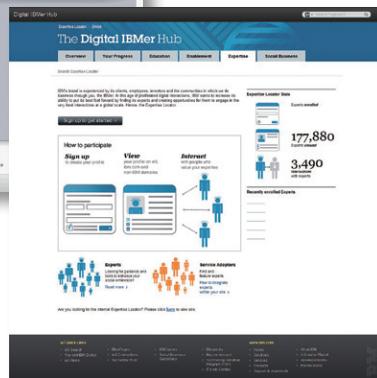ced staff members to get possible solutions to problems or receive advice and suggestions." It is not only a space for new hires to congregate, share ideas and make friends, but also enables them to promptly inculcate themselves into the company culture.

According to Mr. Stanton, there are numerous interactive capacities available in these communities such as Blogs, Micro-blogs and Forums for sharing and presenting ideas. Everyone can contribute their insights and also benefit from the knowledge of others, which helps uncover the most efficient solutions to problems. In addition, together users can create web content as well edit and publish it in Wiki with access they themselves manage. Also through the use of Files, people can post, share, and view documents, presentations, images, videos and much more.

BlueIQ Ambassadors is another internal social community with a number of enthusiasts who offer help to IBM's individual employees, teams and communities. "It comprises social software evangelists who are passionate and volunteer their time and talents to provide online IT advice for their fellow colleagues around the globe on how to use social networking technologies more effectively," says Mr. Stanton.

In these communities, staff members are able to share bookmarks and other interesting links as well as ask questions and get answers, place requests for help, share news and announcements, and make requests for speakers at events through the Discussion Forum section. Or they can share relevant feeds to blog posts, articles, and newsgroups under the Feeds section. Also possible is the creation of blog posts to solicit feedback from the community as well as the sharing of interesting resources on social software adoption or simply writing down what's on their mind. By using the Activities section, anyone can collaborate with other members on action items, to-dos, and micro-tasks.

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Get the Tools for Social Networking

A variety of social software options are available to make the most from a social network. TeamPark creates a collaborative platform for employees to become more closely aligned in a widely dispersed workforce. It helps drive real business results by uniting company teams located in different countries while reducing search time for finding staff and speeding up the formation of consulting teams. It all results in faster market responsiveness.

One can make use of another social software item called Project Shift to move the corporate culture towards a more open collaboration system across a globalised business operation. The internal social network it builds connects thousands of employees and hundreds of communities, leading to more innovative initiatives. As one software user commented - "It makes a big company looks like a small company".

Build Positive Company Values

IBM employees are encouraged to give out BlueThx awards in public in recognition of those who have offered help in the online communities. It serves as a kind of social lubrication for building a cohesive company relationship.

Besides linking current employees, The Greater IBM Connection allows staff members to access everyone in professional networks, including former employees as well as retirees. Members of the network, who no longer work in the company can still help with staff recruitment and retain their alumni connections.

Ultimately the trend toward social networks can help cultivate a spirit of openness and collaboration as well as foster greater sharing within a company. In fact, the communication process in these networks is not always in the traditional top-down structure. A reversed mentoring process is also possible whereby younger staff can offer help to their superiors, for instance with respect to social media applications. **A**