



Enterprise Social Networking: Don't Be Afraid

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February 2010



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Introduction

With the media full of stories about lost productivity and brand damage caused by employee misuse of social networking, it is not surprising that many companies are hostile to embracing social applications. But when applied in a business context, social techniques and technologies can improve the way companies communicate with their customers and employees. A new class of business applications, Enterprise Social Networks, is emerging to enable this. These are more than just "Twitter/Facebook for business" applications, and their relationship to existing Enterprise Portals needs to be carefully planned.

Big Numbers

If Facebook were a country, it would now have the third largest population in world; only China and India are bigger. It has recently passed the 400 million-user mark, meaning that there are now as many people registered on Facebook as there are citizens of the United States. More than 8 billion minutes per day are spent on Facebook.

So it is hardly surprising that many businesses are concerned about the potential productivity loss and impact to their brand image that this brings with it. Nucleus Research found that nearly half of office employees access Facebook during work and that companies effectively lose an average of 1.5% of total office productivity when employees can access Facebook during the workday. Morse estimated that Twitter usage costs the UK economy £1.38 billion a year. Proofpoint found that 8% of US companies reported that they have dismissed employees because of their behaviour on sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, double the number from a year ago.

But it would be a mistake to make a knee-jerk dismissal of the potential of social networking for businesses based on these figures. Used well, social networking has significant productivity benefits for the enterprise.

First, we must separate two related but distinct areas. "Consumer Social Media" (CSM) can be considered a way in which businesses use established consumer-oriented social networks as marketing channels. For example, Facebook fan pages, announcements on Twitter and promotional videos on YouTube.



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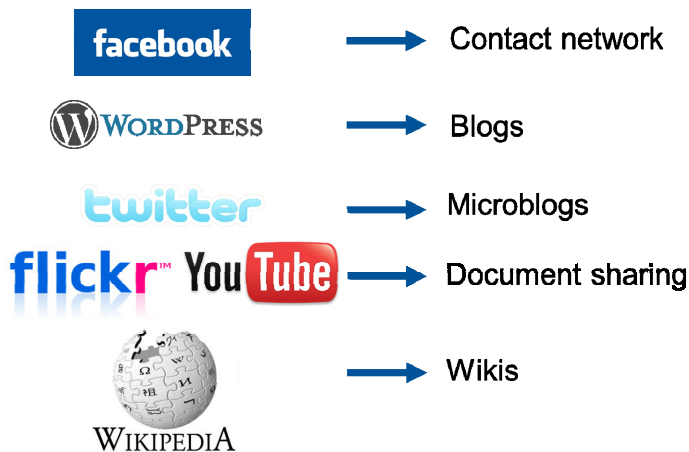
Then there is "Enterprise Social Networking," which concerns how social networking techniques and technologies can be applied in a business context. It is this area that we will consider here.

Enterprise Social Networks

An Enterprise Social Network (ESN) typically consists of the following components:

- Blogging: personal commentary and opinion articles
- Micro-blogging: Twitter-style short updates describing what people are currently doing
- Discussion forums
- Wikis: community-edited repositories of knowledge
- Document/media sharing
- Relationship maps: details of professional relationships between members of the network

These are all technologies that have been established on consumer social networks and are now being applied in a business context. We can consider this trend the "consumerization of the enterprise."





There is perhaps a danger in using the word "social" here. An ESN is not intended simply for socializing between employees and commenting on others' family photos. Instead, ESN is applied to a business context. For example:

- Enabling a customer support team to interact more directly with its customers to gain a greater understanding of customer opinions and requirements.
- Enabling a sales team to work together on a complex business proposal.
- Establishing a focal point for distributed employees in a global company to come together to discuss ideas and innovations.
- Building a corporate culture and sense of community within a company.

While consumer-focused tools like Facebook, Twitter, and even business-oriented services like LinkedIn have established a familiarity and desire for employees to use social networking techniques, they are not suitable for these types of applications. Instead, a new category of ESN application suites is emerging.

Enterprise Social Networks vs. Portals

Will ESN applications replace existing enterprise portals? That depends a lot on the nature of the existing portal. The word "portal" has become so overused that it often means little more than "web site." Probably the best and most complete definition of the different types of portals comes from Gartner, who define five generations of portal technologies.

- Generation one (1998 to 2000)
 - Content and basic portal capabilities, including personalization and the portlet model
- Generation two (2000 to mid-2002)
 - Application integration
- Generation three (mid-2002 to 2003)
 - Process integration and basic Web services support
- Generation four (2004 to mid-2005)
 - Portal federation, portlet standards and composite applications
- Generation five (mid-2005 to 2008)
 - SOA and user experience management

Gartner have now started defining the sixth generation of portals, which includes the application of Web 2.0 techniques such as mash-ups, user-generated content and social networking to portals.

Content-centric vs. People-centric

So is it just a question of sitting and waiting for the “generation 6” release from your portal vendor to turn your portal into a social network? That is one option, but it may be a long wait, and the result may not be all you hope for. The fundamental basis of portal applications, which have evolved in line with the Gartner definition, is a content- and process-centric information architecture. Social networks, in contrast, are people-centric, with priority given to the relationships between users on the site rather than a rigid information structure.



Content/Process-centric



People-centric

Yet few businesses will have the appetite to discard their existing portal investments to start again and restructure their content and processes in a more people-centric way. Yes, small departmental intranets and others that have not progressed beyond the first generation may be straightforward to migrate in this way, but for larger enterprise portals it would be hard to justify the cost and disruption.

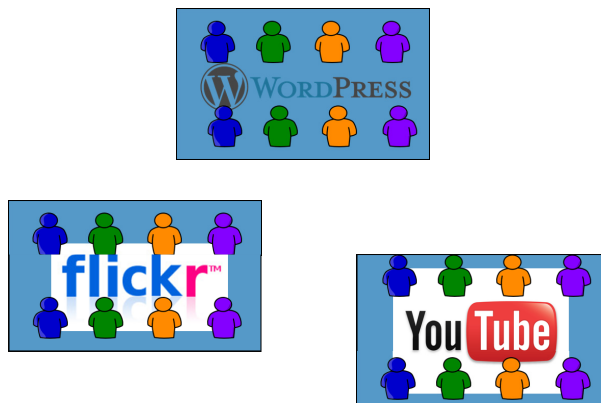
Therefore, the most prudent strategy is coexistence of ESNs alongside enterprise portals. The focus of the ESN is not the content itself, but the discussion and collaboration around that content. Whether the content is hosted on the portal or the ESN really doesn't matter.

To take a consumer-oriented analogy, it is just as easy to use Facebook to discuss a photo hosted on Flickr as it is a photo that was uploaded directly to Facebook.

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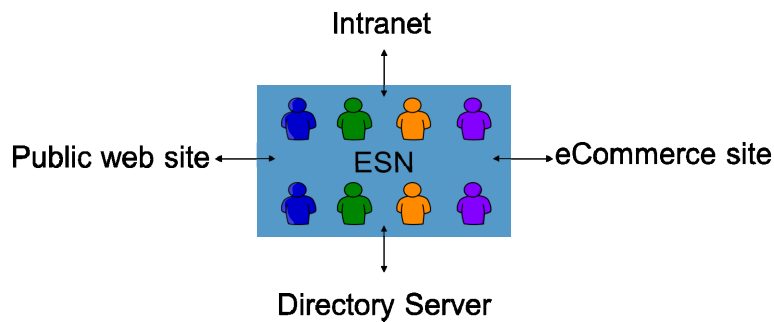
We can visualize the content-centric model in the consumer world like this:



Each site hosts content, and the users have to go to each site to view and discuss the content. This can be contrasted with a people-centric view, like this:



Here, it really doesn't matter where the content is, as long as it can be discussed in the forum where the people are. Indeed, it may be preferable for the photo to be on Flickr to enable its use in other web services. But it is also important to note that users will typically create content wherever it is easiest to do so; Facebook now hosts more photos than Flickr does. Similarly we may visualize people-centric in the enterprise world like this:





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Content on an enterprise portal may need to be accessed from both the ESN and other web sites, such as an eCommerce system.

While this means that some integration is required, the good news is that the technologies and interfaces to enable it are widely deployed in portals already. For example, RSS and Atom for content syndication and LDAP for single sign-on.

Conclusion

Despite the horror stories about businesses and social media, social networking has the potential to bring many benefits to the enterprise. Yes, employee use of consumer social networks needs to be managed carefully. But ESN should be seen as an opportunity, not a threat. It can coexist and complement existing portal investments.



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About Clearvale

Clearvale is the next-generation e-business platform aimed at revolutionizing *knowledge flows and performance* gains across and beyond the entire enterprise ecosystem. Delivered globally through cloud computing, Clearvale empowers the enterprise and all its constituents — employees, partners, customers, and other stakeholders — *to publicize, personalize, and socialize* their communication and collaboration directly with anyone, from anywhere, at anytime, yielding unprecedented business *agility, immediacy, and productivity*. Clearvale is created and offered in SaaS (software as a service) by BroadVision, which has been an e-business solutions pioneer since 1993. Visit www.clearvale.com to set up your e-business ecosystem instantly and let your Enterprise 2.0 transformation begin.



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About Richard Hughes



Richard Hughes is Technical Director at BroadVision, a global provider of personalized self-service web applications. As one of BroadVision's most senior technical staff, Mr. Hughes is integral to guiding product development as well as the strategic success of BroadVision's customers. During his 11 years at BroadVision, he has advised major international companies such as British Telecom, O2, Vodafone, DSG, ABN AMRO, and Ericsson on deployment of their eCommerce and enterprise portal systems. BroadVision's latest solution is Clearvale, an Enterprise Social Networking suite.

Prior to joining BroadVision, Mr. Hughes managed the eCommerce web site at Blackwell's Online Bookshop. He has a BSc in Computer Software Technology from the University of Bath.