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What It Takes To Foster A Culture Of Collaboration

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for Information & Knowledge Management Professionals
EXEClIVE SUMMARY

Corporations are taking a fresh look at the way they support internal collaboration. Inspired by the millions of people using social networking tools and hundreds of new products that foster online collaboration, IT departments are looking to technology for answers. Forrester finds a serious flaw with this approach. While IT departments are implementing the latest fashionable tools, information and knowledge management (I&KM) professionals are finding that behaviors don’t change by virtue of new tools alone. Corporate culture takes the blame. But I&KM professionals rarely confront culture as their primary issue. We found insights from those who succeeded at improving collaboration by addressing culture and technology together.

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Forrester reviewed relevant inquiries and interviewed six organizations involved in successful collaboration efforts, including Boeing, Cisco Systems, Procter & Gamble, W.L. Gore and Associates, a global financial services company, and a US government agency, as well as a collaboration-focused consulting firm, NetAge.

Related Research Documents
“Social Computing Changes The Enterprise Collaboration Landscape”
April 30, 2008
“Web 2.0 Social Computing Dresses Up For Business”
September 14, 2007
“Wikis Change The Meaning Of ‘Groupthink’”
January 10, 2007
IMPLEMENTING TOOLS DOES NOT CHANGE COLLABORATIVE BEHAVIORS

Despite creating a collaboration strategy document and providing collaboration tools, Forrester finds, via inquiries with end users, that collaboration behaviors do not change without addressing issues of corporate culture. Though an obvious observation, IT departments seem to miss this when they wonder why information workers are not using their new collaboration tools. They note that although employees already collaborate, they expect new collaboration tools to improve collaboration behaviors. But why risk wasting investments in collaboration tools if we know that the tools alone don’t drive behaviors?

New Organizational Realities Drive Collaboration

Organizations are paying attention to the need to foster conversations between employees who don’t know they should be working together, or don’t know how to work together effectively. In parallel, IT professionals are looking through the lens of Web-based collaboration tools to modernize their intranet. But why are businesses motivated to fund these activities now? Forrester found three common themes raised by organizations that invested in large collaborative initiatives:

• **Organizations need employees to work with people they don’t know.** In times of economic growth, acquisitions and market expansion stimulate globalization. In times of recession, outsourcing and mergers force workers to discover new teams. Senior management sees the disconnect in the workforce and hopes that technology can help people find and work with their new teammates or partners in other companies, time zones, and cultures.

• **Travel reductions mean that many workers will never meet their coworkers.** Due to recent economic conditions and fluctuations in fuel prices, many organizations are cutting their travel budgets. This means we’ll never meet some of our teammates. There’s nothing like a face-to-face meeting, but technology can bridge the gap by providing “virtually there” experiences via telepresence and videoconference meetings.

• **Workplace demographics pique interest in collaboration tools.** As workforce planners anticipate impending retirements, they look to wikis or other collaborative tools to help capture knowledge and transfer it to the next generation of leaders. We find that younger workers view technology through the lens of online collaboration tools that they use at high rates at home and in school. The ongoing industry trend supporting technology populism tells us that savvy enthusiasts continue to bring new collaboration technology into the workplace.

Cultural Barriers Tap The Breaks

With good reason to stimulate a corporate effort, you have to wonder why organizations report cultural barriers. What’s the problem? Simply put, effective and transformative collaboration is difficult. Even when organizations are committed to enhancing collaboration, they face real challenges to success. Forrester found these seven themes reported by practitioners responsible for collaboration projects:
• **Organizational structures impede collaboration.** The traditional organizational (org) chart implies that individuals work with the people who report to a common boss. In reality, org charts typically signify administrative and reporting responsibility, but workers really work with people from across their organizations. Management-team colocation enables managers to keep an eye on workers, at the expense of workers easily finding others in different parts of the company.

• **Management suppresses collaboration efforts.** Companies compensate managers to close projects on time and within budget. Corporate collaboration initiatives mean that workers reach out to others, outside of the project team. These collaborative efforts threaten managers' ability to manage the process and predict the success of their projects by introducing new players — employees who may not be committed to the project.

• **Internal competition suppresses collaboration.** The traditional workplace rewards individual information workers for the knowledge and expertise they accumulate. So why share it with others? Employees fear that sharing knowledge will result in their replacement by a younger, cheaper worker — one who probably works offshore. Workers want to maintain a reputation for being knowledgeable to serve as collateral, guaranteeing their continued employment.

• **Cultural differences add to a feeling of virtual distance.** Employees find difficulty in establishing common ground with others from unfamiliar cultures. Virtual distance is most pronounced when workers deal with the unfamiliar names and accents of offshore workers. But virtual distance also affects productivity when employees work with teammates from different regions of the same country, or when employees in the central office work with others in a remote branch office.

• **Security concerns limit information sharing.** Awareness training helps workers understand the risks of information leakage and disclosure. Reports of employees losing laptops, BlackBerrys, and unsecured USB drives laden with customer data scare us all. We've been trained to protect information and share on a need-to-know basis. Collaboration initiatives have to assuage our legitimate concerns that sharing information with others won't result in more risk than value.

• **Physical working environments discourage interaction.** Whether you provide closed offices, low-walled cubicles, work pods, or breakout rooms, employees complain that office space is never ideal for the kinds of interaction they find productive. When workers don't walk near each other's desks, collaboration diminishes significantly. Put workers in another time zone, especially one far away, and you'll find collaboration at war with both time and space.

• **Collaboration technology is difficult for many to use.** IT folks who select technology are accustomed to unfriendly software. But the end users are much less tolerant of arcane technology. Some collaboration tools require users to negotiate unintuitive Web interfaces, cumbersome navigation, and techie terms. Users avoid these tools as best they can. Even when workers want to collaborate, the tool interfaces get in the way.
How do I&KM professionals foster collaboration when they can't address these concerns directly? IT organizations rarely empower I&KM pros to address issues such as the organizational structure, management behaviors, competitive behaviors, intercultural sensitivity, or the physical layout of the work area. Instead, human resources (HR) professionals, working with related specialists, take the lead on ensuring the effectiveness of complex and growing organizations. I&KM pros do work with the security and risk department to ensure that workers can create, label, handle, and store information according to information security guidelines. But they often don't set the rules; rather, they implement technologies that contribute to the barrier itself.

Of the aforementioned barriers, I&KM pros have direct involvement with the selection and implementation of technology. But fostering a culture of collaboration takes much more than selecting simple and effective technology. Indeed, I&KM pros will have to collaborate with others to foster collaboration in the enterprise.

**ADDRESSING CORPORATE CULTURE ENABLES COLLABORATION**

We found that most companies do not assign responsibility for collaboration to any one person. It is assumed that employees, with the assistance of their management, will find an efficient work practice. With no oversight, there is no systemic opportunity to improve collaboration habits. Sometimes, companies reorganize to improve collaboration, but they then face the challenges introduced by this disruptive change. Quite often, they turn to I&KM pros for help.

Whether they manage the enterprise content management (ECM) and document management technologies, or they steward the information flow within a business process, I&KM pros play an essential role in the success of collaboration efforts. But therein lies the problem. I&KM pros focus on information technology and architectural issues. They typically don't manage culture — instead, they deploy software. But even the very term “deploy” misses the mark.

“Deployment is not conducive to collaboration. It conjures up images of combat. And this works against the idea of collaboration. We don't deploy software; instead, we offer great solutions. Tools get legs and begin to develop fan-base on their own.” (Laurie Heltsley, Director of Strategic Projects, Procter & Gamble)

So how does an I&KM professional address corporate culture? We asked collaboration experts who ran successful collaboration initiatives and found three approaches that worked. Some organizations assigned responsibility directly to one I&KM pro, who was empowered with a small team and just enough budget to initiate changes. Others formed partnerships between the technology-savvy I&KM pros and management effectiveness experts from the HR department or an outside consultancy. And still others had leaders who believed in collaboration and set examples for their organizations to follow. Most notably, no one expert reported sustained success resulting from a grassroots, technology-led initiative.
Get Support From All Stakeholders

Rolling out a new collaboration initiative will certainly get some workers to roll their eyes. For many workers, socializing and work do not go together. They see “soft initiatives” as short-term fads. Unfortunately, this attitude breeds cynicism and subversion. Subversive behaviors from key stakeholders will destroy collaboration initiatives. Why? Because derailing collaboration initiatives means that employees get to resume well-rehearsed, though inefficient, habits. Success means changing habits, a challenging but achievable task. To change collaboration habits, you need the clear and active support of three groups:

• **Senior management must support the effort with actions, not just words.** Chief information officers (CIOs) are aware they need to address workplace culture issues directly. It won’t be hard to get them to agree to support a collaboration effort — but you have to get more than a nod. They have to champion the effort by actively engaging and using the tools, showing the organization the behaviors they expect to see.

• **Workers must change the way they perform their work.** After experimenting with shiny new tools, workers will go back to work. To succeed, collaboration must become a part of their daily routine. Done correctly, a process change that includes collaboration with others will result in less work in the long run. But an initiative that lacks direct connection to everyday work will fail.

• **Middle management must enable learning and support for new collaboration.** Middle management poses the greatest challenge to these efforts. Changing a process based on the faith that collaboration will improve productivity introduces risks. Middle managers are goaled according to time and budget. Anything that delays a project, or frustrates their ability to measure progress, is a threat to them. They will need senior management to support them and stand behind the change by mitigating the risk of experimentation.

Procter & Gamble’s collaboration initiative illustrates the advantage of broad support. Its initiative enjoyed significant support from executives. Recognizing the legacy of P&G’s cooperative workplace model, A. G. Lafley, chairman and chief executive officer (CEO), set a new corporate vision to “become the most collaborative business culture in the world — inside and out.” With this executive mandate, and with a collaboration champion, P&G re-examined business-critical processes to find improvement opportunities. P&G implemented a combination of solutions, including changes to physical office spaces, a corporationwide instant messaging (IM) tool, and cross-functional product development teams. These changes resulted in measurably faster time-to-market and improved customer satisfaction.

**Think Marathon, Not Sprint**

The day-one excitement of collaboration efforts does not last for very long. Rather than blasting emails that announce the future successes of this effort, start slowly and plan for small daily progress. Involve the critics in the process by having them test new processes and report on problems. Of course, some employees will complain about a change — even one for the better. Preparing for the long haul requires you to establish three critical changes of thought:
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· Allowing for experimentation means that failures will happen. Some companies are so reluctant to admit failure that they will always spin the less-than-ideal project results as “learning opportunities.” Sure, this thinly veiled attempt to protect the reputation of those who lead the failure ensures that others will be willing to take risks in the future. But innovative change is never a certainty. So management must allow change to take place in a learning environment.

· Leading by example means that participation is not optional. Collaboration is not a thought-experiment, or a platitudinous, it’s an act. Like riding a bicycle, there’s not much to talk about that is particularly interesting to anyone. Instead, you have to view collaboration as an ongoing participatory activity that involves many people. Avoid talking about the tools and focus on work improvements instead. For example, point out how collaboration saves time when seeking help.

· Acknowledging that participation levels vary means that one size does not fit all. Even though you are targeting full participation, it will take time to achieve. People collaborate differently and learn differently. Some will dive in and create content for others to see, while others will watch and wait. Don’t expect everyone to join. Rather, leverage those who do participate to help others get onboard.

Boeing’s collaboration initiative illustrates the value of broad thinking. Jim Coogan, who leads Boeing’s Knowledge Management Community of Practice, found that work styles differ considerably when he looked across the work groups and age groups. Baby Boomers — who, he notes, are not retiring so soon — have amassed a wealth of expertise over the years, which they may pass on to the younger generations. But they have different mental models of sharing and trust. Moreover, workers in divisions that work with classified technology face huge collaboration challenges. So, rather than blocking conversations between partners, competitors, and military agencies, Boeing trains workers to practice “secure knowledge-sharing behaviors.” This training shifts the culture from risk-averse to risk-managed.

Pick Technology That Addresses The Problem

Creating a collaborative organizational culture is not about technology. But you can’t ignore the effect technology has on your initiative. Keep in mind the type of people you are supporting, the objectives you wish to achieve with the initiative, and the strategy you plan to pursue. This approach will filter the technology choices down to those that will succeed. Technology alone will not cause success. But failure to address these tips may lead to disappointment.

· Select tools that address the problem. The most transformative behaviors come from targeting technology selection to the real problem. Many times the simple fix provides the most profound impact. For example, getting high-quality telephone headsets significantly improved the daily international conference call in one financial services company.
• **Find tools that are simple to use.** Don’t support tool selection based on the abundance of features provided by a tool, but rather on the necessary features. Technology puts off many users, especially when it overwhelms them. And easy-to-use technology poses fewer barriers to adoption. For example, implementing a simple IM client transformed the work environment for nontechnical employees in a global retail product company.

• **Beware of technology distractions.** IT professionals pay a lot of attention to technology. Sure, you want to keep up with the latest technology versions and vendor standards, but tinkering with technology results in business disruptions and downtime. Don’t let technology get in the way of real work. Collaboration suffers disruptions when IT departments tinker with technology platforms. Instead, remain focused on the business issues so the business users view the changes as improvements, not distractions.

The collaboration initiative of one global financial services company we spoke with illustrates the value of leveraging technology carefully. This company had globally distributed teams in multiple locations in the US and India. Team members had too many places to find and store content, including multiple document management tools, email folders, shared networked drives, and a growing collection of wikis and forums that some teams set up without IT support. The company addressed these issues by implementing a single wiki for managing team project content, team and individual profiles, blogs, and discussions. To address the challenges posed by geography, the company rolled out IM and provided training on the corporate Web conferencing solution.

Consolidating content management onto one simple wiki saved time and supported consistency of practice among the teams. Visibility of content allowed teammates to discover activities that they could leverage in their projects. And the simplicity of an IM tool allowed all employees to participate, with little training.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**I&KM PROS MUST FOCUS ON BUSINESS IMPACT TO SECURE EXECUTIVE SUPPORT**

I&KM professionals will find themselves asked to modernize the intranet and provide collaboration services alongside existing enterprise content management, document management, and teamware solutions. The business will measure successful implementations based on use and impact, not uptime. I&KM pros have to reach beyond their comfort area and work with others in the organization empowered to address issues of culture, support, and business process. Here’s how:

• **Get executive support by focusing on business value.** Groundswell collaboration initiatives within corporations face the challenge of being shut down by senior executives. Businesses are optimized for making money, and changes must be tied to real business value. Trends and fads are worth experimentation, but cultural change and the corresponding technology support must have a champion with serious clout.
• **Accept project responsibility once you have empowered stakeholders.** I&KM pros should not expect to change culture by implementing new technology. You must partner with other stakeholders who can address the nontechnical challenges that will arise. If no one is empowered to change workplace routines, then you don’t have executive support yet.

• **Use the tools that fit the problem you are trying to solve.** You must identify the problem you are trying to solve, agree that it is worth solving, and understand how to ascertain success. Then, select the simplest technology that works in your environment. Business will fund solutions, not technologies.

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**WHAT IT MEANS**

**FOSTERING COLLABORATION REQUIRES COLLABORATION**

IT departments face the challenge of being a trusted utility. They must keep the technology running in a cost-effective manner. They also face the challenge of being a strategic partner, helping the business leverage technology as a competitive advantage. And now we find that IT cannot ignore the softer areas of business support. They must help address issues of workplace culture. In fact, I&KM pros can play a critical role in the success of business initiatives by partnering with the business to provide technology that makes a difference to the business. To be effective, IT professionals have to collaborate with their business partners to foster workplace improvements.

**SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL**

**Companies Interviewed For This Document**

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**ENDNOTES**

1. The 2009 Business Travel Overview & Cost Forecast published by the National Business Travel Association (NBTA) predicts a slowdown in travel industry growth. Moreover, travel costs continue to rise, even during the recent drop in fuel prices. “Recent NBTA surveys of 320 travel managers show that the overall cost for a domestic trip has increased by $140 to $175. International trips have increased by $315 to $400. To manage the significant increase and expectation of continued hikes, most travel managers are responding with cost cutting measures across the board.” Source: “Travel Managers Creatively Contain Costs in Uncertain Economy,” NBTA press release, October 2008 (http://www.nbta.org/Research/Connecting+News/cnOct2008Costs.htm).

2. It is worth noting that the term telepresence refers to the technology that creates an experience of physical presence via careful placement of video equipment and high-definition transmissions of voice and video. Cisco Systems has a product in the telepresence market called Cisco TelePresence. Teleris, HP, and Vidyo are some of the other vendors in this market.
3 There’s no denying it: 18- to 24-year-olds are digital natives. Only 10% don’t participate in social media. Three out of four live on social networks. Moreover, 25- to 34-year-olds closely mirror the social activity of 18- to 24-year-olds in many categories. See the October 20, 2008, “The Growth Of Social Technology Adoption” report.

4 Forrester defines Technology Populism to describe this trend: An adoption trend led by a technology-native workforce that self-provisions collaborative tools, information sources, and human networks — requiring minimal or no ongoing support from a central IT organization. See the February 22, 2008, “Embrace The Risks And Rewards Of Technology Populism” report.

5 The issues go beyond name pronunciation, greeting rituals, and holiday schedules. Workplaces must consider country-specific legal protocols, as well as talent and technology availability. See the August 5, 2008, “Internationalization: The Vendor Escape Hatch From The Economic Downturn” report.

6 MIT Sociology Professor Thomas Allen conducted the seminal research in 1977 and 1986, resulting in the “50-foot rule.” His findings showed that the likelihood of serendipitous face-to-face interaction between engineers in the same group at least once a week dropped to below 15% when engineers sat more than 50 feet away from each other. Distance makes a huge difference to collaboration. However, we cannot all sit in 50-feet proximity circles with all the people in our work group. Of course, the ubiquity of the Internet, cell phones, and IM mitigates the devastating implications of Allen’s now-dated findings. Source: Thomas J. Allen, Managing the Flow of Technology, MIT Press, 1977.

7 In a recent Forrester survey of CIOs and IT decision-makers, we found agreement that culture affects job satisfaction, participation, communication, and IT’s relationship with the business. Technologies like enterprise apps, collaboration software, or project management tools can run headlong into culture obstacles. “That’s not our culture” is a flag waved in the face of changes people fear or don’t want. See the July 30, 2008, “Does Your IT Culture Need An Overhaul?” report.

8 Not only do people differ in their learning styles by virtue of culture, habit, preference, and upbringing — we find that generational issues play a factor, too. The new learning paradigm means that organizations must develop informal learning as a resource for employees to keep their company on the cutting edge. As the younger workforce becomes a greater part of organizations and moves into management positions, these workers will demand different kinds of learning opportunities and tools to get to learning resources quickly. They will expect to control much of their own learning, so learning managers must offer an abundance of useful up-to-date resources inside and outside the organization for information and learning. See the November 12, 2008, “Informal Methods Challenge Corporate Learning” report.

9 Forrester introduced the POST method approach to help create social marketing strategies. The approach guides the technology section by first capturing important information about the people, objectives, and strategy of the initiative. By this point, you’ve determined your customers’ profile, you know what technologies they will accept, and at what rate. Since you know your objective and have nailed down a strategy, now you can evaluate technologies. This is why it makes sense to evaluate technologies only after you’ve finished the other three steps. See the October 9, 2007, “Objectives: The Key To Creating A Social Strategy” report.
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