SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE WORKPLACE

Using social collaboration in the workplace, eliminating silos, and making it easier and more efficient to share knowledge and experience amongst colleagues

As social media created an explosion in the way in which we interact with one another it was inevitable that it would begin to creep into our professional lives. When companies began to recognize the power of social media we found ourselves inundated with more advertisements and promotions across all social media platforms. While from a business perspective the focus remained on outward promotion and brand recognition there was another important factor that was beginning to develop: social collaboration. Organizations recognized through social collaboration a new way to connect and share information and knowledge with people professionally inside the workplace.

I've often asked people during the interview process what they think is the most undervalued asset a company has. The answers are always host to a range of items but the first thing that comes to my mind is a company's talent. People within a company are by far one of the richest resources left undervalued in my opinion. The first step is recognizing the wealth of knowledge at your fingertips. The second step is understanding and finding a way in which to capitalize on the experiences and expertise of your employees and socializing knowledge to the rest of your workforce. A considerable amount of effort has been focused on how to do just that. Five basic steps are instrumental to capitalize on the value of social collaboration in the workplace:

1. Understand and develop the strategy for social collaboration
2. Evaluate software, budget, and resources
3. Develop implementation and launch plan
4. Develop adoption and support plan
5. Develop governance policy and metrics for tracking success

UNDERSTAND AND DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL COLLABORATION

Ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish and if leveraging social collaboration in your company is even a viable or realistic option? Is this simply going to be a free-standing social collaboration tool or are you going to integrate it with existing software currently in place? There are pros and cons to each approach. Free-standing software creates an additional tool to keep track of and monitor, but if your strategy is to, say, create a place for employees to go for all company news, updates, and information, then it could make sense. Many companies have adopted this strategy and leverage social collaboration tools as a way to eliminate the company newsletter, a very one-sided approach to communicating news. A social collaboration site allows for more real-time updates and interaction with end users by allowing them to comment on or like a post, and then ask questions that can be socialized across an organization.

EVALUATE SOFTWARE, BUDGET, AND RESOURCES

Take a look at what other companies of your size and industry are doing. Evaluating what others have done before you is more efficient in the long run compared to just picking the most popular integration tool and not doing due diligence. In my experience, I've seen companies first buy a tool and then try to figure out what to do with it. They are then limited to the functionality of a tool that may not exactly meet expectations or provide the features they want or need. Listening to what has worked for others will help you to understand the challenges they faced and obstacles they overcame.

Evaluate existing software that is already being leveraged within the company. A lot of CRM tools have incorporated social collaboration tools into their software. It could make sense to take advantage of those existing social collaboration platforms without a larger investment into more software, pending the tool meets the needs and is in alignment with the strategy.

Budget is another large factor in determining the right solution for integration. Are you going to need to hire externally or need additional resources with expertise to help with implementation? Do you have in-house resources that could be leveraged on this project? If so, how would their involvement impact other projects in the pipeline? The cost of software is a large portion of the budget, but implementation, adoption, governance and monitoring costs will have an even larger impact to total cost of ownership.

DEVELOP IMPLEMENTATION AND LAUNCH PLAN

Defining an implementation plan with all critical steps outlined will allow stakeholders to react to the plan and account for any items that may have been missed. The idea is to have proactive thinking incorporated into the plan so outlier factors and potential problems can be identified before they become actual problems. The implementation plan will serve as a guide to the program layout and pilot launch plan. The launch plan takes into consideration a beta period where a distinctive set of users will go through the process that will be present in the formal launch, including communications, training, support, feedback, etc. The lessons learned from the beta period are incorporated into the formal launch, making adjustments for the larger rollout audience. Understanding the resources that you have and

establishing realistic timelines with the appropriate amount of cushion are key to ensuring a timely and on-budget project.

DEVELOP ADOPTION AND SUPPORT PLAN

Having an implementation and launch plan determined, attention needs to shift to how end users will be engaged to adopt the new collaboration tool. There will be end users with a lot of experience leveraging social media and collaboration tools and others with little to no experience. What training materials will need to be developed to cater to the large spectrum of differing experience and how will this material be presented? If supporting materials are posted internally, where does an end user go when they still have questions? Change communication correspondence will need to be developed and communicated to the audience. Who will be supporting the product? What does that process look like? One question I am always asked when implementing social collaboration tools from end users is, "What's in it for me?" How are you going to motivate your end users to want to participate and leverage the new tool? Will you have facilitators to monitor the site and entice or start new conversations? All of the above questions should be considered and answered to ensure proper communication, adoption, and support.

DEVELOP GOVERNANCE POLICY AND METRICS FOR TRACKING SUCCESS

Administrators of the tool will need to develop a governance policy in accordance with company standards, ethics, and policy. Going back to the different levels of social collaboration experience, you will want to ensure end users understand the difference between a professional work environment collaboration tool and other more personal sites such as Facebook.

Are people actually using the tool? Do you have metrics in place that will show the amount of stories posted, comments made, questions posted, etc.? Some success metrics are built into most social collaboration tools. Ensure the reports that you will be able to obtain meet the criteria to successfully track meaningful metrics. Additional metrics solutions can be purchased as add-ons with customized reporting available. Reach out to end users and get feedback on their use of the tool, ideas for enhancements and reasons for non-use. Leveraging surveys and the collaboration tool reporting functions will help to elicit this type of crucial feedback. Spending money on a product that is poorly utilized leads to a negative impression of the overall project and defeats the purpose of implementation.

CONCLUSION

Social collaboration in the workplace, if properly strategized and implemented, can be an impactful tool. The keys to successful adoption are having a clear strategy and implementation plan in addition to a formal adoption plan. Integrating new technologies into the workplace shows versatility of changing with new business trends but will fall flat without initial planning. The other major factor is that value needs to be seen from an adoption standpoint, so the new technology doesn't gather dust in the cloud. Expectations must be clearly communicated to end users. If the tool is seen as a hindrance, adoption will not happen, and the knowledge that employees have will continue to remain in silos amongst individuals. The idea behind social collaboration in the workplace is to eliminate some of these silos and have a repository of knowledge and experience at the fingertips of all colleagues without the painful extraction process.   If social collaboration can be adopted and implemented successfully, it benefits all colleagues as less time will be spent on one-on-one knowledge transfers and more time can be spent on actionable tasks and deliverables.

This TIP was written by Stephanie Gray, who specializes in technology implementations, solutions delivery and project management. Stephanie welcomes comments and discussion on this topic and can be reached at stephanie.gray@trexin.com.