Can You Twitter Your Way to Performance Excellence?

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Twitter is the latest new thing. Like to follow John McCain or Al Gore throughout their day? Easy. Just sign up to receive their tweets. While their tweets may provide insights, or just entertainment (Ashton Kutcher and 50 Cent also tweet), does Twitter have value for business management? The idea may not be far fetched—remember that instant messaging initially met with disdain by corporate IT types but has now become nearly as mainstream in corporations as email.

Like all new technologies before them, the newest communication technologies will open new possibilities for enhancing business performance and enabling value-adding capabilities. The most compelling uses may not be the most obvious. Where will we see the biggest impact? The internet did transform the sale of music (thanks, iTunes) but it didn't wipe out the neighborhood grocery store (sorry, Webvan). Some early trends are emerging and they promise to transform today's best practice standards for knowledge management and customer interaction.

New communication tools parallel (foster?) growing social and cultural changes (in most parts of the world) toward greater transparency and democratization. These changes are also playing out within individual businesses and non-profit organizations.

The pace of change in the tools themselves is probably a good indicator of the pace of change we can expect in business practice. In the early days, on-line communication meant email and those early email applications were trapped in the confines of proprietary systems that didn't talk to one another. There was a time when ftp (file transfer protocol) and chat rooms were novel, and for those who had the requisite technical skills, useful tools. The world wide web arrived and early web pages were filled with generally static content, which, in turn, created a need for indexing and navigation that was filled neatly by Yahoo. Many companies implemented intranets to enable convenient sharing of documents and information, using a one-to-many communications model.

AOL popularized instant messaging. Wiki's, a kind of electronic whiteboard, followed which for the first time allowed non-technical users the ability to create, edit and manage dynamic on-line content with relative ease. Wiki's are still popular today, along with blogs (on-line personal journals), forums (electronic discussion boards), and social networking sites, such as Facebook. Microsoft's SharePoint software and IBM's Lotus family of software bring all of these tools together in an integrated environment designed specifically for business settings. And now enter Twitter.

How fast is technology moving? Broad public use of the internet began in the 1980's and accelerated during the 1990's. According to Internet World Statistics, there are approximately 1.6 billion internet users today, nearly 24% of the world's population. Facebook was founded in February 2004 and today welcomes 200 million active users, about half of whom log on at least once a day (according to recent statistics provided by the company). Two thirds of Facebook users are outside of college and 70% are outside the United States. Twitter was founded in March 2006. While Twitter doesn't publish usage numbers, Forrester Research estimated the number of Twitter users at nearly 5 million in March 2009.

Companies are applying these tools, including Twitter, to improve staff effectiveness, reach customers in meaningful ways and engage business partners who are outside their formal organizations. To get a sense of the changes they are bringing, it is insightful to look at currently recognized best practices. A review of the application summaries of the 2007 and 2008 Baldrige recipients suggests that validated best practices that employ the newest enabling technologies have yet to take hold. While the Baldrige application allows only 50 pages, and we don't expect every Baldrige organization to be a world class leader on every dimension of the Criteria, there is very limited mention of the latest technology tools being applied to boost, say, team collaboration or knowledge management.

Focusing just on knowledge management, which will be such a natural beneficiary of these tools, the current state of the art according to recent Baldrige recipients does not appear to have grown much beyond the static intranet environment that has now grown so familiar as a one-to-many communication medium. The power of the new tools lies in their ability to enable many-to-many collaboration which, in turn, heightens innovation, increases speed and enhances alignment.

Baldrige recipients typically have well defined, systematic processes to identify, catalogue, share and implement best practices. The most prevalent approaches emphasize in-person meetings, conferences, training classes, and centers of excellence, all of which support few-to-few collaboration. Typically Baldrige organizations maintain repositories of practices, procedures and lessons learned on shared network drives, portals, or Microsoft Outlook public folders. These configurations emphasize one-to-many sharing. The dominant paradigm: providing access to previously generated knowledge for use in solving current problems. While this is decidedly valuable, it is unlikely to remain sufficient as a performance enhancing knowledge management approach.

The secret to extracting value from the new tools is to prioritize connection over content while maintaining a systematic approach, according to Hubert SaintOnge, a recognized expert in knowledge management and organizational learning. On-line tools, such as threaded conversations, blogs and forums, can facilitate connection, collaboration and engagement. For example, Iredell-Statesville Schools, a K – 12 school system in North Carolina and a 2008 Baldrige recipient, uses both face-to-face and virtual Professional Learning Communities to identify and share best practices. They cite a variety of on-line tools to support this work. The City of Coral Springs, Florida, a 2007 recipient, hosts blogs on problems and issues that enable city employees to tap into the institutional knowledge of their entire workforce. However, these citations are the exception, rather than the rule, among recent recipients.

In a recent white paper on enabling innovation in the workplace through collaboration, IBM sketches a vision of a new way of working:

> "In the old way of thinking, employees make themselves valuable through what they know. But in the new way, people make themselves valuable by seeking opportunities to work with others and tapping into the expertise that others possess. In the old way, content is owned and protected. In the new way, content is developed through participation; it is fluid, contextual and leveraged to create opportunities through ongoing collaboration. In the old way, directories of people provide static contact information. In the new way, dynamic profiles reflect what people do, with whom and how well they do it."

Some pundits believe that Twitter will become the next exponent of virtual collaboration, enabling real time exchange of knowledge and ideas among subject matter experts. The more common business applications of Twitter currently seem to be extensions of customer listening, learning and promotional channels. Forrester Research notes that "marketers as diverse as Dunkin' Donuts, Comcast, and Dell also use [Twitter] to connect with fans, address support questions, and sell products." JetBlue Airlines, as has been widely reported, routinely tracks Twitter traffic and responds to customer complaints and

frustrations promptly. In the meantime, in many businesses, tools such as SharePoint and Lotus are helping teams collaborate to find better, cheaper and faster ways to accomplish their work.

Finding these new ways of working implies the need for new skills and can also create challenges to ingrained organizational culture. To achieve its cutting edge use of Twitter, JetBlue employs internal social media evangelists and technologists. Of course, the use of any new tools brings the need for training of users and IT staff. Yet the larger implementation challenge often relates to changing work habits, such as the entrenched use of email for communication with colleagues. Building an environment that captures the benefits of the "new way", where people openly share and participate rather than "own and protect", requires a culture that values openness and promotes trust.

The current wave of on-line tools readily enables virtual collaboration, breaks the constraints of geography and promotes asynchronous communication to help overcome time zone boundaries. Individuals with shared interests and common goals can work together, build knowledge, solve problems and conduct many types of business quickly and cost effectively. The power of the medium is its interactivity. The potential to create leading practices is in its infancy. Whether Twitter flourishes or fades, the direction is clear: greater immediacy and intimacy with electronic communication.

References

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