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Communities based on shared interests are fine for consumer social networks. At work, only a community of purpose is worth our time.

People love social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in their personal lives. However, companies have had less than stellar results replicating that energy with in-house social collaboration for their employees. While some blame the technology, the real problem is that companies demand a fundamentally different approach to social networking. Companies need to start building communities of purpose.

A consumer platform like Facebook is a community of interest. It's a repository of content related to a topic or group of friends. You join a community of interest because you just want to, because it's fun.

Communities of purpose are quite different. They're focused on actionable, targeted output, within some set timeframe, to meet an agreed upon business goal. You join a community of purpose because you need to get something very specific accomplished, and you see social, Web 2.0 technologies as a way to do that work faster and more effectively, collaborating with peers to work on content.

Communities of interest thrive under an absence of formality. To create a community of purpose, however, employees need a framework to accelerate and enhance the benefits from social technologies. Without that framework, two bad outcomes are likely. First, employees will develop mediocre and poorly coordinated content. Second, even if employees show an initial burst of energy around using a social networking platform, it will burn out quickly unless someone is actively managing the platform to focus the energy on a specific goal that the business values.

## 5 Key Success Factors

Companies are racing to introduce business oriented social technologies. But regardless of which social technology they employ, there are five factors to consider in building a community of purpose that employees actually use and that delivers real business results.

**1. Motivation:** Focus on three areas. The first is what the business needs from the community. If the business need isn't well served, you may get a thriving community of interest, but it won't deliver a meaningful result. The second and equally important vantage point is that of the user—one frequently forgotten about in the context of business. How does it help the employee get something done more effectively? What's in it for them? The third is whether internal IT will actively support the social technology effort. Cloud-based solutions have made IT's blessing slightly less important, since groups are less reliant on IT to launch communities.

**2. Culture:** If the company culture doesn't value and reward group participation over individual winners, information sharing will be compromised and the community will achieve only limited success. Culture comes not only from the values, trust and collaborative support of the company's leadership; it is driven by how well people support each other and value collective intelligence relative to individual contributions. We have run communities that focus on group success, and we've run ones that reward individual success. In communities where the output benefits the individual, we have found participants increasingly wait until the very last day to submit ideas. They have a lot at stake and are reluctant to reveal their cards too early.

**3. Behavior:** Culture sets the company's mission and expectations for collaboration; behavior is about making sure day-to-day use of social media technology serves the company's goals in practice. This starts with a clear purpose for the community, but it may also require training and giving employees time for collaboration using the community platform. And just because you build it doesn't mean they will come. Mass email as in invitation to participate won't get more people to contribute—personal emails (mail merge!) will. If there's no response to or acknowledgement of content submissions, it can make a contributor feel like they've put something in a black hole. Have a "What's in it for me?" incentive to keep people engaged over the lifecycle of the community.

**4. Influencers:** Social technology has not only flipped the organizational hierarchy upside down, it has spun it around a few times. People who actively contribute to a community of purpose can come from any level in the organization. It breaks the top-down hierarchy, so a person's message, if it's on point, can resonate and carry more weight than executive communications. This creates a new breed of influencer, so you need a strategy to make sure the right message gets heard in an internal community of purpose, and beyond.

**5. Community Maturity:** The maturity level of the community isn't about age, it's about the ability, interest and trust of a group of people to use social networking technologies at work. This maturity is a critical factor that leaders must plan for when crafting a community of purpose framework. Where the maturity level is low, additional time and resources may be needed to shepherd a community. When maturity's high, companies should explore new ways to foster greater and broader participation. One way is to relinquish increasing levels of decision-making control to the community. Leaders in a mature community can be tapped to evangelize with low-maturity communities in communicating the successes using higher maturity-level techniques.

## Next Steps

As is the case with many technology and change-management initiatives, there is a general formula for success when implementing social networking technology for employee collaboration. We recommend four key areas of focus to implement a community of purpose.

**1. Targeted Business & User Value:** Focus on a particular area, such as one that can produce measurable cost savings in a targeted expense area (such as travel, benefits or office equipment). Another could be the development of apps for a particular technology platform. Focus on concrete goals, like a discussion area on how to reduce customer wait times by 50% in 12 months. State the purpose of the community clearly to both the business and the user community audience. Measurable results can then serve as fertile ground for launching other communities.

**2. Inventory Current State & Interest:** Regularly conduct candid assessments of the intended community-of-purpose participants about their perceptions of the value of participating in the community and how well the technology is working for them. For example, ask about:

- the cost-benefit of time invested;
- unexpected benefits, like growing their internal network or connecting with people they may not have otherwise, ties that ended up helping them in some other way; and
- their tolerance for automated, community-driven selection of output, such as voting that lifts some comments above others.

Take these factors into account as you assess which community attributes have the highest likelihood of success. Does the community like voting and commenting, or using game theory techniques, stock trading or prediction markets? Is the community benefiting from community involvement? These will all help in determining the appropriate approach for the community-of-purpose initiative.

**3. Small, Demonstrable Steps:** A short (two- to six-week), focused program for a broader audience (e.g., innovation program for a specific product or business) or focused area with a specific business purpose (e.g., improving account management) is well-suited for the introduction of a community of purpose. Once a company succeeds with a community, it can establish another. Open-ended challenges about the "next big thing" don't work—they're a community without a purpose.

**4. Review & Refine:** Continually collect meaningful empirical data in terms of engagement, results and feedback and incorporate this into future refinements of the community of purpose. Having hard data will make it easier to show the value the community of purpose is delivering to the enterprise. For example, if there is a rumor about who is/isn't participating in a

particular community, or if feedback tells you one thing but the data tells you another, you'll be equipped with numbers to state the facts.

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