



## Social Media in the Workplace – Are We Nearly There?

By Tarik Taman, Infor

Since Facebook was invented a decade ago, it has attracted a billion users worldwide. Twitter now reports 200 million users who send 400 million tweets every day. Compounded by record IPO valuations well into the billions, there is little doubt that the social media way of life is here to stay.

While it may seem like social media is still relatively new, it has already moved through a number of stages in its evolution. Only a few years ago, when its popularity amongst consumers was soaring, its role in a business environment was at best confused, and at worst extremely negative.

In the years that followed, the business software industry merely fanned the flames of these perceptions, adding social networking applications alongside systems with no real agenda or purpose. Conversation was perpetuated, but there was zero business value or impact on employee performance.

The value of social networking in a business environment started to be seen as forward-thinking and predominantly consumer-facing. Businesses embraced its role as a marketing tool – incorporating blogging, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube into marketing programs. Much of this was focused on capitalizing on the huge audiences these platforms attracted and campaigns were often focused on exploiting them as additional outlets to reach audiences.

In the wake of this shift, the role of social media in business suddenly resonated as valid – but its role had been monopolized almost entirely by the chief marketing officer.

Other functions within a business – including Human Resources – remained largely immune to the charms of social media. Negative connotations of Facebook as a workplace distraction prevailed, and many managers were unable to make the mental shift from consumer products, asking you to “like” them on their Facebook page, to the role of social media in running a production plant. That is...until very recently.

### Revelations for a Revolution

The disastrous early examples of social technology within

the business environment highlighted that for social media to be valuable in this environment, it has to be used collaboratively. Instead of social conversations persisting in parallel with the task in hand, it must be an integral part of that task, or the business application in use. And, while marketing programs had used social media successfully, the majority of campaigns were focused on platforms as channels and few exploited the capabilities of social media to support multi-way conversations. In light of these lessons and in the hands of other departments, it soon became apparent that social media could be used to engage and empower employees to make more informed decisions, which, in turn, can address problems, reduce procurement costs, boost productivity, facilitate better customer relationships, and drive high performance.

The lines between emerging technologies and ones that have become so firmly entrenched that they are now thought of as “traditional” (like email or even instant messaging) are blurring, expanding and continually changing. This evolution has brought the social media conversation to a pivotal point, which is what role, if any, social media has to play in the way employees interact with each other in a business environment.

Dubious is probably the best word to describe the reactions of many executives when the subject comes up. Many struggle to see the value and worry that it might actually cause harm. They already find it difficult to keep employees from posting personal Facebook or Twitter updates during work hours. Why would they provide yet another vehicle for wasting time?

While it's easy to understand why companies want to approach social media with caution, there's also considerable risk in dismissing it altogether. Misperceptions about what these technologies mean could cause businesses to miss out on a major opportunity to reinvent the way their employees work together – and generate potentially game-changing benefits in the process. The key is to apply the concepts of social media in ways that have inherent value in a business environment.

### How does it Work?

To develop the concept of social business technologies, it's helpful to build a picture of how those technologies are actually being used by employees to simplify processes. One of the most critical points to understand is that with social business technology, a collaborative platform is embedded within critical organizational systems, like enterprise resource planning (ERP) or supply chain management (SCM) systems. Access is not limited to individuals who typically interact with those systems, but is extended across the enterprise, making the platform a company's primary vehicle for all employee interaction.

Documents, videos, photos, plans and, most importantly, conversations are all captured, organized, searchable and auditable. Employees can easily share and find information and also have information come to them, through both automatic notifications and business intelligence that is displayed directly on desktops or mobile devices and based on their specific roles or responsibilities.

For example, Company X has just won a contract to take over management of all networks for a major retailer. Joe

Smith is managing the transition and has 10 members on his team. Using the collaborative platform provided through his company's social business technology, Joe can create a group, with controlled access, where all the conversations and information for this project can reside.

One of the first steps is to finalize contracts with suppliers. Joe and his team can hold conversations about various vendors, with information about existing vendors' invoices, performance ratings, etc., displayed automatically within their collaborative environment. The team can also post vendor contracts to the site and have its legal team review, comment on, and approve them.

Later in the project, when additional staff needs to be hired to meet the contract requirements, HR can get input on job descriptions and résumés. And, if the customer agrees to publicity, the PR team can get approval on the press release and share information about coverage. And, when one of Joe's key managers leaves suddenly in the middle of the project to take another job, there will be no need to try to piece together the work she has done; it will all be stored on the collaborative social business platform.

Social business lets many people touch the same project, stay informed, and keep the right people apprised of movement. As shown above, companies are now looking at social business initiatives because of their potential to drive bottom-line benefits, such as:

- **Increasing employee productivity** – The words productivity and social media aren't often put together in a positive way, but helping people work more efficiently is one of the major promises of social business technology. Reducing email loads, putting information where people can find it easily, and allowing employees to collaborate in context (of data, conversation trails, project plans, etc.) should indeed make them more productive – and improve overall performance in the process.
- **Retaining vital corporate knowledge** – Social business allows companies to take advantage of information that is currently lost through technologies like email and instant messaging. This information represents the “why” and the “how” of the qualities that make a company what it is, and can hold the key to uncovering game-changing opportunities.
- **Attracting and retaining top talent** – Expectations for technology have changed, most markedly for employees just entering the workforce, but also for those with decades of work experience. People have come to take for granted the technology they use in their personal lives, and they now expect business software to deliver the same fun, intuitive, easy-to-use experience. Social business and other technologies like mobility, analytics, and the overall user experience allow companies to meet these higher expectations. Metrics in this area, which most often falls under the rather broad umbrella of “employee satisfaction,” are starting to show hard evidence of its benefits.
- **Improving decision-making** – Social business technologies make collaboration among employees easy, but they also deliver information that aids decision-making

in ways that tools like email or instant messaging simply cannot.

## Social Onboarding and the New Hire Process

It's no surprise that effective onboarding is critical to the success of a new hire. According to the Human Capital Institute, 46 percent of new hires don't last 18 months and 39 percent didn't complete their first milestone on time. These stats can be attributed to an unorganized process to get employees up to speed – from a lack of clear direction, to inadequate tools, to an absent manager. Now, with tools for social business being implemented throughout the enterprise, organizations can quickly link employees together and speed the time that a new hire is assimilated into the new culture, give them a platform to get questions quickly answered, and allow them to easily access documents.

In addition, through an internal social network, new employees can meet other new hires, people in their new department and connect with important contacts through their own online community. Advanced social tools have given many companies the opportunity to link together projects with status updates and develop a group to leverage for knowledge, questions, etc. This quick and streamlined process makes a new hire quickly feel like a part of the team, which could aid in overall retention at an organization and more enhanced productivity.

Logistically speaking, social business tools for onboarding can help link together the internal HR team to confirm paperwork, connect with IT on email addresses and any needed personal technology such as a tablet, laptop or mobile, have the office manager set them up in a cubicle, and ensure that they will be ready to go with any learning tools/sessions the company might require of its teams. This ensures that everyone receives status updates, no one is left out in the process, and you can quickly go back and see who was responsible for a specific part of the process. These process improvements, coupled with the value of having new employees become productive, integrated members of the business faster, generate real benefits for organizations.

## Integrating Social Collaboration into the Learning Process

Human Resources departments at forward-looking organizations are also starting to rethink their approach to learning, putting new emphasis on collaborative strategies, rather than relying exclusively on traditional, formal training that is organized into structured classes. This technique, called social learning, is a process that adopts a learner-centered attitude and pull – not push – techniques to broaden access to critical resources. In addition, social learning appeals to the way the Millennial generation employees tend to work and live. But, that doesn't mean you should throw away formal training techniques. On the contrary, it's the perfect time to enhance your learning program in ways that open it up to your entire organization.

By adding social collaboration to their HR program, organizations will be ready for the emerging paradigm shift in organizational learning and evolve from static training to a dynamic learning model. This will also empower employees

to seek and contribute knowledge by using pictures, videos, documents, wikis, or any other type of data that clarifies and advances institutional learning. Your employees will be able to contribute information to an active knowledge base that other employees can refer to for up-to-the-minute knowledge. As a result, everybody goes to work armed with the most current, accurate, relevant information. This real-time access to knowledge enables employees to become more efficient, as they are not wasting time searching for the most up-to-date information, or duplicating efforts.

## Implementing a Plan

With any new technology, there is a learning curve for how to implement and use it most effectively. There are, however, some factors that are critical to consider when evaluating this technology. To maximize the benefits of any social business initiative, look for technology that will allow you to:

- **Integrate systems across your business, regardless of origin.** Most companies have highly complex technology landscapes, with systems and the information they store sitting in silos. Until recently, this problem was incredibly difficult to solve, requiring complex customizations and integrations to make disparate applications work together. However, technology has evolved that makes integrating systems straightforward and simple, allowing them to connect in a way that makes them work together without being dependent on each other.
- **Embed social business within organizational systems.** The biggest benefits of social business come from making it an integral part of employees' work environments and allowing them to collaborate right alongside the critical information that resides in your systems, whether that is an unpaid invoice or a detailed product launch plan. Collaborative tools that simply sit on top of core organizational systems are more likely to create additional information silos and duplicated effort, rather than increased productivity.
- **Find information quickly and easily through powerful enterprise search capabilities.** As many businesses have come to realize, having more information doesn't necessarily translate into better performance. With the amount of data available to companies growing exponentially, the goal is transitioning from getting access to information to being able to quickly find the right information. Social business technologies must incorporate powerful, organized, and structured search capabilities to address this issue.
- **Deliver information directly and automatically to users.** In addition to making it easy for users to find information, also look for technology that lets information come to your employees through what is known as "contextual intelligence." A concept that might have sounded like magic a few years ago, this technology delivers customized, pre-analyzed key performance indicators (KPIs) directly and automatically to those who need them. This capability allows decisions to be made in context of supporting data, with employees collaborating based on up-to-the-minute information.

## Social Business in Action

Leading companies are already reaping the benefits of social business. Take a leading manufacturer of frac sand for the oil and gas industry, for instance. The company, which has grown exponentially over the past five years, needed a solution that would reduce downtime in production and enable staff to make good business decisions as quickly as possible. To achieve this, the company invested in a social business platform that enables employees to form communities to help with business initiatives and share thoughts and feedback similar to how they would via their own personal social networks, thus increasing both productivity and employee satisfaction. As real-time information from enterprise applications flows directly into the system, employees no longer have to waste time searching for data on their own or switching between applications. So, instead of waiting for an assistant to bring the company's CFO an expense report, an alert can be sent via the social business platform, and the report can be approved right then and there, without opening the expense management application.

This technology has had a dramatic impact on the way this company's employees communicate and collaborate across departments. With the platform, the accounting team, for instance, can provide instant feedback on spending decisions, rather than waiting for an end of month report. This insight helps project teams stay on budget, as they are alerted when limits are reached. These are just a few ways that social business has improved business operations.

## A Meaningful Makeover

Social media has forever changed the way people interact, and its influence will only continue to grow. While the concepts that social media has given us hold great potential for the business world, building a successful social business strategy must consist of more than simply tacking a Facebook-like collaborative platform onto existing organizational systems.

To truly generate value, social technologies must integrate seamlessly with business processes to make working within a collaborative platform as common as sending an email and, eventually, replacing it altogether. The results can be transformative, with the biggest benefits coming from the ability to harness corporate knowledge and drive high performance in ways that are simply not possible with the tools most companies employ today. Although the future of social business technology is still being written, there is little doubt that it is poised to change the way people work, leaving us all to one day marvel at the way things used to be.

## About the Author



As the general manager of Human Capital Management (HCM) and Cloud Enterprise Resource Management at Infor, Tarik Taman is responsible for converging Lawson, Workbrain, and Enwise products to deliver a differentiated, end-to-end HCM solution. Prior to Infor, Taman was the CEO at Quantum Retail Technology, Inc. He also served as the vice president of EMEA for Oracle Corporation and Retek, Inc. He can be reached at [Tarik.taman@infor.com](mailto:Tarik.taman@infor.com).