BY WESLEY WU

'Mavens' and 'Connectors'

The advent of Web 2.0 gives HR leaders a whole new opportunity to bolster their organizations' knowledge-sharing and collaboration capabilities.

HR technology has always been at the forefront of HR change. With the advent of the database, HR shed its role as the keeper of manual payroll processes and steward of the company picnic and quickly found new capabilities to track the workforce and provide some minimal understanding of the state of the organization's employees. Workflow and self-service in modern HR applications have provided another step in the evolution of HR. By removing administrative and manual tasks from the daily routine, HR has become incrementally more strategic. Technology tools have also provided better analytics to give us deeper insight into the workforce.

However, HR—for the most part—has rarely been an integral part of the business. These days, HR leaders may talk about "service delivery," being "business partners" and focusing more on "talent management," but the objective of these initiatives is to make the delivery of HR services and processes more efficient, not to change the way the workforce directly creates value for the business. It may have moved from being administrative record keepers to being the owners of talent management, but it hasn't shown value to the operations side

of the house other than it can "get them people." Generally, HR has had no impact on the way in which talent's *value* is deployed. That is now changing with Web 2.0.

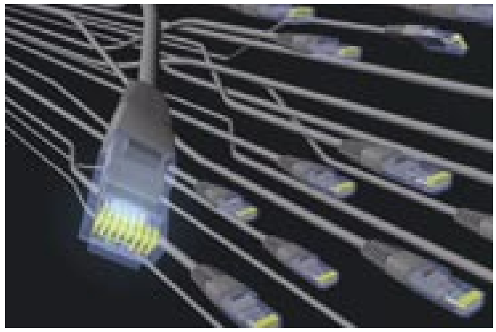
If Web 1.0 was defined by the linear and unidirectional interaction of a single user with a Web page, Web 2.0 has been partially defined by the simultaneous interaction of many users within a community, i.e., Facebook and MySpace. Enterprise networks can perform this same function behind the corporate firewall, allowing real-time collaborative interactions.

The role of social media in the enterprise has yet to be clearly defined, even with its rapid adoption by many organizations. Project-management offices may use wiki technologies as tools to track progress, while research-and-development departments use blogs to publish knowledge and promote new practices. HR has found uses for the CEO blog to promote employer branding. Blogs have also aided in areas such as new-hire onboarding.

But social media, for all its vast potential, comes down to a single idea: connecting people to content and content owners. It's within these connections that value is ultimately created. Unfortunately, many HR departments seem to focus on tactical questions rather than the strategic goals of social media. This view needs to change.

As we implement the various social media and networks at the workplace, many of the current water-cooler conversations and hallway chats between co-workers will be displaced by wikis, blogs, discussion boards and instant messaging. Often, these are accidental, unplanned meetings of the minds where thoughts and ideas are shared and many spontaneous solutions and innovations arise. Currently, however, geographic disparities limit many collaboration opportunities that could be valuable to the organization. But as we move into enterprise social networks, the opportunities for individuals to connect, share and then collaborate become more simplified and more plentiful, although the sometimes accidental nature of sharing disappears.

In the future state of Web 2.0 enterprise networks, HR will help manage collaboration.



Directing Traffic

While many believe that HR doesn't have a role in nurturing collaboration, nothing could be further from the truth. It's not enough to simply give employees tools for simplifying and increasing connections between them. While doing so will certainly lead to increased collaboration, it isn't the most optimal exploitation of social media.

To gain the most efficient utilization of a collaboration network, one must first understand how collaboration works. It is more than just bringing people together to share knowledge and ideas in simple transactions. Rather, it involves a complex network of agents who transact, coordinate and direct inquiries from senders and recipients.

To be truly effective, the collaboration network must be able to identify the individuals who hold specific types of knowledge (or who Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point*, calls "mavens"), those that help direct traffic to knowledge holders (people Gladwell calls "connectors"), and those who are able to synthesize knowledge from multiple sources to create new innovations ("synthesizers").

Imagine a typical water-cooler transaction:

Tom: How was your weekend, Jane?

Jane: Great, but I spent too much time trying to figure out [XYZ engineering problem].

Tom: You know, I hear Mary has a straw model to fix a similar problem. The ABC project team is looking at the issue to see what they come up with. You should go chat with them.

In this case, Jane is the requestor of information, Tom is the connector, Mary is the maven, and the project team is synthesizing the data. In most collaboration networks, the connectors are fairly stable: The same people always know where to go to find experts, even if they're never the experts themselves. Similarly, the mavens and deep subject-matter experts for specific types of knowledge generally remain constant. In today's world, these are informal and uncodified networks that rely on users "knowing somebody." In the future state of Web 2.0 enterprise networks, HR will help manage collaboration as a quintessential HR function and a natural extension of its relationship with every other function.

HR can help facilitate these transactions simply by recording skills and competencies within the workforce and making them available to the network. This makes sense because HR not only has employees' self-identified skills and competencies at its disposal, but also job histories, performance reviews and other relevant data sources. By identifying people within the network as subject-matter experts, mavens or connectors, HR can take even more of the guesswork out of matching knowledge with needs. In essence, HR could use a system of tagging to identify competencies, skills, knowledge and subject-matter expertise for each employee. And, while it may require some effort, employees should also be able to self-update their own areas of expertise and have those data sets automatically uploaded back into HR and talent-management systems.

"Tagging" Knowledge

As the network matures and evolves, both the complexity and accuracy of employee "tagging" models should increase. First, a quick definition of tagging: In a Web and social-networking environment, tagging allows any user to create information about any data in the network.

As described by Wikipedia.com, a tag is a non-hierarchical keyword or term assigned to a piece of information (such as an Internet bookmark, digital image, or computer file). This kind of metadata helps describe an item and allows it to be found again by browsing or searching. Tags are chosen informally and personally by the item's creator or by its viewer, depending on the system. On a Web site where many users tag many items, this collection of tags becomes a folksonomy.

In our example, the data would be a person and the tag would be a competency. Therefore, if I'm an employee looking for information about designing a widget, I should be able to look for tags associated with "widget" and find the right resources to help me.

As employees find resources within the network, they also have the opportunity to tag them. They may do this in employee blogs, entries on internal wikis, or participation in the network. As employees in the network create blogs or post changes to an enterprise wiki, those entries can also be tagged to identify their content. Network interactions in the form of blog comments and traffic to the specific Web page provide a measure through which popularity, insightfulness and expertise can be inferred.

When an employee writes a particularly interesting blog entry on a topic, other employees might also tag and rate that entry, which is directly related to the employee's competence on that topic. So, each time an employee participates in any way, the

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network should be able to log and categorize that action. When the actions are categorized, we get information on what the employee is interested in, and also, perhaps, data regarding how competent they are in those topics.

For example, a single employee comment on a topic could be seen as providing low-level insight or requesting more information. But the employee who posts 20 or more transactions on the same topic might be considered either an interested party or subject-matter expert. By going to the next step and looking at the connections that exist within the employee's network and how the employee has interacted with those connections through instant messages, blog posts, wikis and discussion boards, the organization could identify that person as a transaction agent in addition to being a subject-matter expert.

While HR's list of employee competencies and knowledge often centers on the employees' jobs, networks and the traffic patterns within them may reveal interests and subject-matter expertise outside their normal jobs. Additionally, as employees move around an organization and use previous work experiences, HR may find that their ability to collaborate in areas outside of their subject matter is greatly enhanced.

To fully realize the impact on collaboration networks in the business, HRIT organizations will not only need to mine their HR databases, but ensure that they're looking at metrics from the enterprise network as well. Integrating the two data sets and creating new types of analytics will inform HR not just about job competencies, but also about the employee dissemination and flow of knowledge from, through and to specific employee users.

Matching employee competencies in the talent databases to content, activity and traffic within the network can provide an analytical baseline through which new patterns of employee movement and conversation can be analyzed. It is through the combination of these metrics that HR will be able to best identify connectors, mavens and synthesizers in a collaboration network, and help employees put these skills to the best use. These analytics will allow HR to better facilitate knowledge transactions, and, therefore, create a stronger value proposition for its role in the business.

If the future of HR lies with greater integration with the business, then it must quickly adopt new technologies and exploit them before opportunities vanish. While the widespread implementation and adoption of these technologies may be several years away, many HR organizations can start preparing now.

Well-aligned competency models that include the roles played in collaboration models can be developed today. These models can be further broadened by incorporating employees' skills and interests.

Business-intelligence tools such as data mining and data warehouses will be needed to combine data—everything from future collaboration tools to current HR technologies. Multi-dimensional data warehouse technologies will be used to combine data from core HR systems, talent, learning and any future Web 2.0 metrics.

HR needs to start incorporating Enterprise 2.0 tools into the organization. A major cultural change is necessary to reap the full rewards, and that takes time to create within a company culture. Now is the time to start.

Enterprise networks will accelerate the speed of communication, resource identification and collaboration. That acceleration will increase as HR incorporates data that only it can offer, including information on competencies, performance, job and organization history. The question is whether HR will be prepared to take a leading role in this new model of employee collaboration.

Send questions or comments about this feature to hreletters@lrp.com.

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