

Social Computing to Improve Work Place Collaboration: Social Networking

by

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Introduction

Over the years, as companies grow globally and expand across nations, virtual teams have become common practice. But, what exactly IS a virtual team? How do we distinguish teams that collaborate heavily with email, instant messenger and phone calls from teams that are truly “virtual?” According to Amberg, Reinhardt, & Kittler (2008), a virtual team has certain traits that set them apart. Amberg, Reinhardt, & Kittler go on to describe those as such,

By definition, members of VTs [virtual teams] are typically geographically dispersed and therefore rely heavily on IT to communicate and collaborate. According to the degree of IT usage is varying and the boundaries, which VTs have to overcome, may also be temporal or relational. In order to meet the requirements of specific tasks their composition is often very flexible, and team members are drawn from different departments or even different organizations. Usually VTs consist of a limited number of members who know one another personally. Members bring in different skills, knowledge and abilities which lead to interdependency in their tasks (p.128).

Assuming most true virtual teams are set up this way, there is a good chance that many members of a team have never met each other face-to-face much less have worked together on a daily basis. The challenge then for these virtual teams is to work together and get to know each other virtually. Some may argue that getting to know someone on a personal or deeper level is not necessary when working in a team, but researchers on the subject disagree. Socio-emotional processes in team building include relationship building, team cohesion and trust (Amberg, Reinhardt, & Kittler, 2008). These factors are very important when working in a team, virtually or not. So, how does a virtual team create and build trust when they cannot meet face to face? Amberg, Reinhardt, & Kittler suggest,

It would be conceivable to institute chat sessions or virtual coffee breaks on a regular basis. Team cohesion ‘[...] refers to member’s attraction to the group and to its task.’ This is why cohesion has great influence on individual satisfaction and is a prerequisite for effective communication and information exchange (p. 183).

Chat sessions or virtual coffee breaks are indeed good suggestions for building team collaboration and working together. However, the focus of this paper is to explore other web 2.0 tools for building team camaraderie, trust and cohesion. The author would like to focus on social networking, as it has become a popular tool throughout our culture. Now that companies and business are starting to get heavily involved with social networking, perhaps their teams can too. Through this article, the author will explore a few social networking sites that could be quite beneficial to virtual teams. Ning, Facebook, and Yammer are three popular social networking and blogging sites. By looking at the pros and cons to using each in a virtual team in order to build camaraderie, the author will then make a recommendation for the most adequate tool to use.

Discussion

Ning

So what is Ning? Ning is a site that lets a person create his or her own social network. Businesses can use them to meet, network and coordinate events. The network is customizable, so users can make it as complex or simple as they want. Creators can determine what the site looks like (matching company colors for example), whether the site is public or private and set up functions like videos, photos, chat, forums and blogs. In addition to all that, a premium version allows users to create space branded URLs that are removed from the Ning domain and does not have any advertisements (Barone, 2009).

According to Using Ning for Business (2009), there are seven advantages to using Ning for business,

1. It's free, and everything you need to build a high class social platform is available for you.
2. You can upgrade and use your own domain and get rid of the ning advertising.
3. You can also take over the advertising space and then charge your members a fee to advertise.
4. Ning regularly appears on the front page of Google results – ask the question “who invited you or how did you find us” to new members, and if they say “through the search engines” get in touch to ask them if they remember the specific words they used in their search to find us. That way you know which key words you are coming up for and use them in your tabs! (this could apply for blogging too)
5. You are provided with promotional tools to help yourself and other members promote the network. Once members start inviting other people your network soon grows.
6. All the help and support you need is available through the Ning support team so you don't need to figure anything out.
7. The source code is available for you so should you decide to move your platform off Ning and onto your website you can do that.

All of these are great reasons to use Ning. Additionally, Barone (2009) states that Ning does a great job of allowing users to create dynamic content; it can be used to organize events and meetings and it works well with integrating other social tools like Flickr photos and YouTube videos.

Seems like Ning has a lot to offer businesses, but what about virtual teams? Many of these features are great for networking, meeting other business owners and attracting clients, but is it right for a team? It certainly has features that would support social networking within a virtual team, (profile, chat, and blogs) but the use of the site would have to be determined by the virtual team. Finding the right social networking site for one's virtual team may not be easy.

Facebook

By now, most people are probably familiar with the social networking site, Facebook. Started on a college campus, the site has gone global and now has over 500 million active users

worldwide (Press Room: Statistics, 2011). Not only do individual users have a claim in the social networking site, companies, services, bands and organizations are connecting with this growing tool. According to Tan, et. al. (2009), "Facebook allows users to establish their own social profile for disclosing varying degree of personal information" (p. 7). Additionally, users can add friends and engage in social interactions, which in a virtual team, could facilitate and strengthen the development of trust within teams (Tan, Nguyen, Tha, & Yu, 2009). Add the ability to add third party applications (discussions, file sharing, scheduling) and Facebook can become a great tool for virtual teams. Facebook allows users synchronous (chat) and asynchronous (messages, like email) forms of communication, and the tools can facilitate knowledge sharing (Tan, Nguyen, Tha, & Yu, 2009). Tan et. al (2009) discussed some of Facebook's features and how they can be used to build trust and communicate within virtual teams. Status Updates and Notifications are an important part of the Facebook platform. Using these tools in a virtual team can help create trust among members. Photo Sharing, Tagging, Commenting and Poking are all reciprocal features of Facebook. When members use them, they are communicating back and forth and building camaraderie through reciprocity. The Social Profile, Friends and News Feed features of Facebook all add in to the identity of a person on Facebook. Virtual teams can learn a lot about their group member's hobbies outside of work and find out who they are through the Profile. Finally, the Wall is a space for shared language. Users can write to each other with comments for all to see. This kind of interaction builds social interaction ties (Tan, Nguyen, Tha, & Yu, 2009).

Facebook certainly can be a great tool for virtual teams. It has the ability to tie groups together, foster trust and gives teams a place to collaborate and work together (group or team pages). However, this large social networking site does not come without its drawbacks. One concern when working with such a well-known site, is how well team members will utilize the site on company time. There certainly could be the potential to engage in non-work related use of Facebook when one should be collaborating with a team. This is one drawback to using Facebook that companies and virtual team leaders will have to take into account when planning to use social networking tools.

Yammer

"Yammer is an enterprise social network, providing a secure way for employees to communicate, collaborate, and share information" (Yammer, 2011) Employees can use Yammer to discuss ideas, post news, ask questions and share information. Additionally, Yammer has a company directory feature where each person can have a profile and past conversations can be easily accessed and referenced (Yammer, 2011). Yammer is a free service but companies would have to pay to claim and administer networks. Network security is ensured by limiting access to those with a valid company email address (Yammer, 2011).

Yammer offers a wide variety of social networking and team collaboration tools to help foster team building, camaraderie, and information sharing. Yammer offers: Enterprise Microblogging, Profiles, Groups, Direct Messaging, Files, Links, Images, Communities, Company Directory, Knowledge Base, Administrative Tools, Security, Topics, Applications, and it works with a mobile device (What is Yammer?, 2011). Many of these tools are not present in some of the other social networking sites this paper already discussed. Yammer offers a lot more to companies than just a profile and communication tools. The fact that a company directory is present, plus the ability to share files, links and images combines social networking with a great

platform for team structure. Teams would be able to learn about their teammates via the profile section, send direct messages and then the team could operate via the groups or communities feature (What is Yammer?, 2011). Yammer does have one major disadvantage and that is, “to become an administrator or have control over the group or information, companies need to pay to claim and administer their networks” (Cuyvers). Essentially, although Yammer is a “free” site, if a company wants to operate under their own name and use it as a functional tool, they will have to pay for it.

Recommendation

Through this paper, the author has taken a look at a variety of different social networking tools that can be used to build camaraderie, trust and information sharing in virtual teams. These sites all have their own unique platforms that can be used in conjunction or separate from other web 2.0 tools. The author is basing her recommendation today on three main factors; variety of communication tools, type of communications tools and cost. While Ning is a great social networking tool, it seems that its application may be geared towards business-to-business connections and would not be a great fit for a virtual team. The site is free, but it does not have the large variety or number of communication tools that Facebook and Yammer have. Yammer has by far the largest range of communications tools with an excellent variety. It definitely would serve as an excellent tool for virtual teams. However, companies will have to cough up money in order to have control over their network, which is a critical part to the success of working in a virtual team through Yammer.

That leaves Facebook. While it may not have been created with the idea of virtual teams, it certainly has the ability to foster team building, trust and collaboration. It is free to use Facebook, and it does offer users a great many types of communication tools as well as variety in communication tools. The synchronous and asynchronous communication tools within Facebook along with extensive profiles, groups, applications, mobile features and link capabilities are why Facebook gets this author’s recommendation. One word of caution to groups looking to implement Facebook into virtual teams; make sure there are standards of conduct for Facebook use. Users who are not partaking in business or teamwork while in Facebook should face harsh consequences.

Overall, following strict use guidelines, the use of Facebook in a virtual team should fit any team’s needs and help the team reach their goals.

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