

Unlocking tacit knowledge with social networking

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“We know more than
we can tell.”

Michael Polanyi, c. 1969

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Some 40 years ago, Michael Polanyi, a distinguished economist, scientist and philosopher famously observed “we know more than we can tell”. If he was making that statement today, he might say, “we know more than we know how to tell”. Polanyi’s observation was in fact referencing tacit knowledge, the accumulated knowledge that is stored in our heads and in our immediate personal surroundings. Tacit knowledge is likely the largest, most valuable distributed database in any organization. However, this accumulated knowledge is not easily accessible or explicit to those around us, and by adding our own colour to this knowledge using our innate abilities, education, training, lifestyle and experiences, we further reduce the likelihood of easily exchanging such information. Fortunately, in today’s technologically advanced society, we are experiencing the unlocking of Tacit knowledge in new ways through various types of social networking and related Internet tools that are entering business. This new era of human behavior enabled by high-speed digital wireline and wireless technology in which “everyone is doing it” (“Era of Emergence”), and participating with one another at work and at leisure (“Era of Ubiquitous Participation”) at any time of the day or night is at full throttle.

Being immersed in a world of mobile communications, high-speed Internet, smartphones, multimedia, unstructured information, e-mail, social networking and collaboration we have at our fingertips powerful applications never before available to us. These new tools create a myriad of ways to create and disseminate more and more information and knowledge, and participate in applying this in business as well as at leisure. Companies large and small increasingly endeavor to keep up with the massive amounts of information generated by their workforce and its interactions with clients, customers and stakeholders. They are experimenting more and more with participative computer-based tools spawned by the Internet. Such newly emergent technologies and techniques need to be reconciled with

traditional risk profiles and business practices. All the while, the company’s workforce and clients are becoming more social-networking-savvy as a consequence of using such techniques in their “off duty” personal lives, and to interact with working colleagues worldwide. How can a company capture and use its distributed human database of tacit knowledge to enable it to function effectively and efficiently in the new online era, satisfy the participative requirements of their workforce, clients and friends, and stay within reasonable risk and business-practice boundaries?

Tacit knowledge can be unleashed and shared as never before by connecting people ubiquitously through social networking and its closely related partner, collaboration. In large and small companies alike, tacit knowledge is stored in the heads and personal information collections of thousands of employees of all levels, not to mention their clients’ personal stores of information. Up until now, tacit knowledge has scarcely been captured in conventional computer-based databases because it has not been easy to “tap”, summarize, save and use in day-to-day business. Up until the advent of the current high-speed “digital age”, tacit knowledge was shared by “putting our heads together”. Formal meetings, cocktail parties, talking on the telephone and chance meetings in corridors or at “water coolers”, have been the traditional ways of sharing this accumulated knowledge stored in our heads and about our persons. Through traditional mechanisms, people shared tacit knowledge on an ad hoc basis. Since the emergence in the 1990s of e-mail, these chance encounters began to formalize online. However, times change and people change with the times and e-mail, not being a natural social-networking tool, cannot keep up with all the demands of sharing and implementing our accumulated knowledge. E-mail enables the user to have direct interactions with one or a few persons on a specific topic, but is limited in its ability to capture the attention of, and, more importantly, involve the participation of a larger audience.

In order to try and harness this information in more effective ways, some companies are using collaboration tools. One of the tools used at PricewaterhouseCoopers, for example, is IBM's Working Community format. This is used as a workroom to facilitate teamwork on documents, and share information stored in the conventional form of numbers and sentences. Team members can capture, save, share and communicate their knowledge across the group and draft and edit documents of common interest. The working community format is a more effective version of the "computer shared drives" in that it offers a larger range of collaboration features. However it is important to note that social networking tools differ from collaboration tools; they enable greater sharing and discussion of tacit knowledge which has not yet been reduced to numbers and printed language. For example, a social network for sharing tacit knowledge on revenue generating opportunities would enable the posting to a "community" of short descriptions of items of interest such as leads to new proposals, engagements and revenue, and invite comments on, and additions to, these postings. The social network would enable an interested person with appropriate capabilities to easily join the "sub community" or "team" for taking the particular opportunity further. Once this opportunity has become reasonably well-articulated, the team would transfer to a working community to collaborate in a highly focused way on formalizing the proposal, engagement or project, and driving the opportunity to an engagement and new revenue.

Dell has adopted its own version of an online networking tool, a type of social networking tool. In 2007 they launched IdeaStorm, "an online forum where readers can suggest new business ideas, vote for their favorite submissions and interact with Dell". The purpose of the forum is to inspire employees and customers alike to share and collaborate with each other and the company to brainstorm ideas before releasing them to the wider community. The tool proved effective when, for example, sufficient customers asked Dell to launch Windows XP preloads instead of early versions of Vista preloads. Bank of America has taken these ideas even

When it comes to choosing a social networking tool to tease out and apply tacit knowledge, there are a few important tips to keep in mind:

- Which demographic are you trying to target? Is the tool being used in Toronto, nationally or even globally? There are different issues and requirements to be considered in each one of these uses.
- The tool should be well matched to the particular objective of the social networking community, for example, additional revenue generation.
- Follow Einstein's advice: The tool should be "as simple as possible, but no simpler." Initially it would likely be wise to disable and hide some of the features of a commercially-available social networking tool until the users are comfortable using its elementary features, and can see real business benefits emerging from its use.
- The tool should be easy to use and be a "Come to you" rather than a "Go to" application. There are far too many "Go to" activities that most executives and employees need to negotiate during their business hours; e.g. Go to check e-mail; Go to the Portal; Go to databases of resumes and qualifications, Go to top-management policy directives and so on. Expecting busy executives and staff to "Go to" yet another tool, in this case a social networking tool, may turn the user off from using it even though it may enable additional significant benefits. Rather, the social networking tool should automatically open at certain key times of the day inviting, if not insisting on, participation; e.g. immediately after signing into the Enterprise's system with your password, when you submit your time sheet or report for the day, or at some other well-chosen time.

- Initially, to gain experience, social networking applications should perhaps be limited to internal participants. Thereafter it could be opened up to select external participants on a relevancy basis. There are exceptions to this caution; e.g. connecting to, and socializing with “friendly communities” such as an Alumni community rich in useful Tacit Knowledge. Another example is recruiting university graduates using Social Networking.
- Cost is an inevitable consideration. Ensuring that the objective of the social network is well defined and that one chooses a tool or sub-system of a tool which is “as simple as possible, but no simpler” should enable an application of modest cost.
- There are significant reasons for introducing social networking into human resources practices. All too often, especially in large organizations, staff see HC/HR as there only to “serve the bosses” and therefore somewhat “unapproachable”, even “intimidating”. HC/HR would likely appear less intimidating if social networking – especially with younger members of staff – was enabled to openly share and discuss personnel issues in a participative way. This would likely also be welcome relief from the commonly used unilateral, non-participative survey techniques for gauging staff satisfaction, and hearing about staff-perceived company inadequacies.

further and built an online small business community. The site can be accessed by any member of the general public, however as a user you are encouraged to join as a member to access the full functionality. The community’s key features include a forum and member stories, aimed at allowing the user to promote her/his business and share business tips, business stories and upcoming events. The site provides a forum for its members to share their own tacit knowledge and access others.

Social networking is fast becoming the business world’s answer to unlocking tacit knowledge hidden within the workforce. In this digital era social networking is being used wisely, it seems, to complement conventional tools – phone calls, email, face-to-face meetings that we so dearly relied on in the past, and still must use extensively.

Companies large and small are beginning to use social networking as an important mechanism to access tacit knowledge, the knowledge that has up until now not been as accessible as quantitative information which is stored in conventional databases. As our tacit knowledge continues to grow and evolve, we must indeed wonder how this knowledge will be accessed in the future: will tools other than social networking and collaboration, as we know them today, emerge and evolve in the years ahead? If progress in these matters continues at the current rate it seems likely that we will be able to modify Michael Polanyi’s famous statement about tacit knowledge even further, perhaps even as far as saying that “we can tell, share and apply all that we know”.

For additional reading see [Technology Trends in Business and Society on the PricewaterhouseCoopers Gateway Portal](#).

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