Intranets

Supporting collaboration with social networking software

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How joint working can be implemented in organisations, using SharePoint, Notes, and other software

I spent much of the first week in September entombed in the basement of the Royal Lancaster Hotel. If the location seems somewhat familiar it is probably because it has been the venue for the Online Information Conference Awards Dinner for the last few years. I was there attending the Gartner Portals, Content and Collaboration Summit in London. (http://www.gartner.com). This company may not be familiar to many of you but it is well respected for its forecasts of trends in the IT industry.

It is not often I attend conferences as a delegate but this one turned out to be an excellent choice and was especially notable for the balance of strategic insight and tactical best practice in the areas of search, portals, collaboration and content management. There were over 330 senior IT managers present, from 29 countries, and what was especially remarkable was that over 200 of them squeezed into a room to hear a presentation on how social software tools could (and should) make an impact on intranets. Of the three pre-conference workshops the collaboration workshop attracted the majority of the attendees.

'Collaboration' was the dominant theme of the conference. One of the forecasts that was presented was that that the extent to which two or more people would work together to make decisions would increase by 50% over the next few years. The drivers for this would be increasing business complexity, and the need to solve problems and address opportunities that were new to the business and for which there were no 'easy' solutions. Another factor in the rapid adoption of social network applications is that the current generation entering work for the first time use these applications intensively outside of the office and expect to be able to use them inside the office. Over the last decade, many organisations have tried to set up discussion groups and failed, but now need to bury that experience and start again with web-based tools, and a commitment from the top to use these to take advantage of the expertise of the organisation.

A case study from Vodafone made the point well. Of the 66,000 employees some 40,000 are using 7,000 collaboration 'rooms', and there are over 70 professional communities. There is also substantial use of these collaboration spaces by external partners. Looking at this situation from another perspective, social networking is really knowledge management in action. In another case study, from Shell, the benefit of using these spaces is a significant reduction in e-mail traffic. 'Send and store' is being replaced by 'Store and send' as documents or comments are added to a work space and an alert is sent out about the item. One of the asides from a Gartner consultant was that for far too many people a 'good' day was a day when the number of items deleted from a mail box is greater than the number that arrive. Sad but true!

One of the sub-themes of the Summit was that of governance. The push-back on social networking tools often comes from senior managers worried about what might be contributed to blogs and wikis. However, blogs are always named (or there is no point in writing one), and wikis have audit trails, so both are less risky than e-mails, which can be invisible. Another dimension to governance came up in a session on portals in which David Gootzit, a Gartner analyst, said that in his experience the reason for the failure of portal projects was poor governance from the outset.

To most IT managers, the only options to support collaboration were Microsoft SharePoint and Notes from IBM, but the point was made by several speakers that there is a wide range of start-up companies offering social software. Of course in time they may well get swallowed up by larger vendors, but in the meantime, the cost of entry and experimentation by any organisation is so low,

and potentially has so many rewards that without doubt the best thing to do is try it and see, and not wait for the IT department to migrate all your SharePoint Server 03 files to MOSS07. That's not an easy task.

Overall I walked out of the Summit realising that I had not been paying enough attention to the collaboration environment, and I suspect that is the case with many intranet managers. Now is the time to change, because if the organisation does not provide support two things will certainly happen. The first is that consumer products will be used unofficially, and the second is that the chances of the organisation not being able to make effective use of the skills of staff will increase rapidly.

I'd certainly recommend any intranet manager to consider attending the next PCC Summit, which will take place in London in September 2008.