Social Networking, an Emerging Technology

By

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Abstract

This paper deals with the emerging technology of social networking. It covers the aspect of how social networking affects the daily lives of people, the way in which they work, and benefits and legal issues that can arise for employers when social networking is allowed in the workplace. There are three case studies that illustrate these points, and then a conclusion about the direction that social networking is headed.

Introduction

There are many emerging technologies today, and it is difficult to determine which ones will succeed and which ones will fail. Many that are developed never make it out for an extended use with the public or business, while others are swallowed up by a bigger company and then quietly disappear or are incorporated into another product. Thus, when choosing an emerging technology one must look at the rate of adoption at the current time, if the technology has been evolving to meet new needs and input from users and business, and if there is a viable return on investment in the technology.

One emerging technology that is making inroads is that of social networking. This is a technology that is affecting people in many areas, not only at work but also at home, school, and during relaxation times. As people move from using in-person meetings to using IM to using social networking to being able to communicate with others in a vast network that is not confined to the company that they work for or the school that they attend, this will impact their daily lives more and more.

Companies are starting to rely on social networking to improve their communications with their customers as well as to attract new employees, and to foster a greater bond than what exists currently.

In fact, the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth's Center for Marketing Research surveyed companies from the 2006 Inc. 500 list, to gauge the level of familiarity and usage of six forms of social media -- blogging, podcasting, online video, social networking and wikis. Out of 121 respondents, generally managers and other senior-level executives, 42 percent claimed to be

"very familiar" with social networking, followed by 38 percent with message boards and 31 percent with blogging (Schweitzer, 2007).

The study goes on to report that a majority of the Inc. 500 companies acknowledged the critical role that social media plays for their future success, with two out of three respondents indicating that it is "very important" or "somewhat important" to their business and marketing strategies (Schweitzer, 2007). Thus it can be seen that companies are starting to realize the value of social networking and making allowances for using it in the company.

Social networking will allow people to interact in more ways at work, and can bring departments that might be in different buildings, cities, states, or even countries closer together. It will also allow a greater wealth of information to be stored about the way in which people communicate and act with each other, which could lead to other problems that will be discussed later in this paper.

To help with the understanding of social networking, three companies were chosen to be used for short case studies about how and why they are utilizing social networking, and what, if any benefits the companies have obtained or expected to obtain from social networking. The companies are IBM, Jobster, and Yelp.

The technology

Online social networking has undergone many changes over the years, since the first BBS was created and used to link people together to send files and post messages to one another. With

the introduction of the Internet, social networking began to take on new forms and involved the

creation of such sites as MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn to name just a few of the more well-

known sites.

By utilizing the Internet, these sites and others have been able to provide common ground

for people to meet and to communicate various details about themselves as well as to contact

others almost instantaneously, so that communication is comparable to a face to face meeting or

communication on the telephone.

Social networking can also provide a source whereby a company can see what other

needs a customer might have, or be able to use the technology to identify what employees might

know a contact at a potential new client and then use that employee to obtain an introduction to

the new customer (Joined-up thinking, 2007).

Other ways in which social networking works is in an instance where a movie producer

can link the entire post-production film crew into one application where they can track work

progress and resources (Francisco, 2007).

Another example of a company starting to realize the value of social networking is that of

McDonald's which began moving toward social networking after an internal study showed that

employees were often looking for colleagues with expertise in certain areas or for authors of

information they found useful. McDonald's employees and some partners will soon be able to

create their own profiles on the company's Awareness social media platform, from which they

can blog and participate in communities (Hoover, 2007).

Thus, it can be seen that social networking has grown from the simple and plain BBS to providing a service not only to the user but also to many others who may come in contact with them as well as providing a useful and expanding service for companies and their customers and potential employees.

The perspective

For the purposes of this paper, the approach about social networking is from the perspective of the business, and will deal with three major areas; 1) Cost, 2) Security, and 3) Legal.

The first area is that of cost. As with any new technology, a company must consider what it will cost to acquire it, to provide daily maintenance, and allow for any upgrades to software and equipment for current use as well as future use.

Since many companies already have servers and workstations running in the business, it would appear at first that the cost of implementing social networking would be minimal, but that is not always the case. The company must consider the extra load that will be placed on the network and the computers, as well as the costs of any software that must be purchased or developed in order to realize the full benefits of social networking as planned or as expected for the future.

Due to the fact that the number of servers, routers, hubs, switches, and workstations that can be purchased as well as software packages that can be developed or obtained from a vendor

are so vast that to provide actual costs would be beyond the scope of this paper. However, most computers and network components that are in use today will suffice for a company to use in the beginning.

A business must also decide if they will create their own internal social networking site or utilize one that is out in the public domain, or a combination of both so that they can have both public and private areas.

The second area that a company must think of when deciding to implement a social networking site is what types of security problems will be faced with the use of this technology. As with many other technologies at first, security risks were not a concern or even thought of, but today the impact of security has become one of the most important items that a company does or should consider when allowing the use of it within the company network or even outside of the company network, since any problems in an external network can reflect on the company.

However, there have been times when companies were slow in responding to any types of security problems or threats, both current and potential, and often nothing is done until after there has been some damage done. By then the costs to the company can become enormous, with some companies closing up due to these types of problems, so this is something that should not be thought of sometime down the road, but planned for at the very beginning.

Not only does security of the network have to be maintained, but the security of the data that can possible be disseminated has to be considered. No company would want any confidential information to be released, or for any unauthorized person to gain access to it in any other way, so this is something that would have to be looked at before any sites are implemented.

And, the other parts of the network will have to be kept secured, else there is no end to the damage that a company can suffer from a malicious attacker, and this is not only a security concern but also a cost that must be taken into account when the project is first being studied for possible use by the company. These needs must also be thought of no matter if the social networking is internal or external.

Finally, the third area that the company must consider is that of the legal aspects of using social networking. The needs and rights of the company must be thought of, as well as the needs and rights of the employees and also those of the customer. However, even though a social networking site might be internal, there must be a written list of what is acceptable and what is not that all employees have to read and understand. This list should be signed by each employee when hired, and then kept on file so that there is never a problem with knowing that the employee knew what was allowed and what was not. Employees that were hired before the start of the social networking site should have to have this form signed and added to their files, so they are covered also.

These protections would be there for not only the company but also the employee, so that they could use them if needed for any legal matters. The company would also be able to use them in court to show that the company had taken due diligence to provide a list of allowable practices so that the lack of this would not be a defense against the company.

Customers would also benefit from knowing where the company stood on these matters, and be able to see that the company had protections in place so that all would be able to utilize the site and not have to worry about things. These protections must also include provisions for the privacy of the customer, the employee, and the company.

If a company does not provide a clear plan as to what is acceptable and what is not when it comes to social networking while using the company property, then there is the possibility that the company is open to some legal action if there is a problem that is caused by one of the employees of the company or even by a customer who has used the company property, since it would be implied that the company had acquiesced by allowing the customer the use of the company property.

The companies

The first company that will be looked at is IBM. Despite its pin-striped-suite, white-collared-shirt and old-line image, IBM is actually making strides with what it calls "Enterprise Mashup" technologies. I recently moderated a panel on "Web 2.0 in the enterprise" at the SIIA in Manhattan. Rod Smith, IBM's president of emerging technologies and a panelist -- sans tie and white shirt that day -- talked about how IBM Enterprise Mashups essentially helps workers collaborate by using Google maps, wikis, blogs and other Web 2.0 applications that are helping them (or their children) in their social lives. For instance, a movie producer can link the entire post-production film crew into one application where they can track work progress and resources. In another example, the Mashup can help logistics managers determine when to ship items by using weather reports, maps from Google Maps and a company's internal systems to determine which stores or facilities will be affected by a storm (Francisco, 2007).

IBM has also added to its Lotus software package, by creating "IBM Lotus Connections", social software designed specifically for the demanding requirements of business. It lets one utilize the

collective knowledge of the organization, partners, and customers by dynamically building new connections between people, the information they know, and the tasks they are executing. Lotus Connections delivers this capability through the following five integrated components:

→ Profiles is the directory and expertise location component that helps find people across the organization so task can be completed faster.

→ Communities allows people with common responsibilities or areas of expertise to collaborate by exchanging information.

→ Blogs provide a way for subject matter experts to present their ideas, receive feedback and learn from the experience of others.

→ Dogear is the social bookmarking component that allows one to quickly find information that has been tagged and pre-qualified by people in the network.

→ Activities delivers a single place to view, manage, and collaborate on all the information (for example, e-mail, instant messages, files) related to executing a specific task with your team.

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These components can be accessed through browser interfaces or through existing applications such as IBM Lotus Notes, IBM Lotus Sametime, IBM WebSphere Portal, and Microsoft Office. IBM Lotus Connections runs on IBM WebSphere Application Server, so it delivers the scalability and security that is needed for business IBM, 2007).

It can be seen from this that IBM is using the social networking software to create an internal and external network that will allow employees and customer to come together better, communicate faster, and exchange information in new ways that will help the company, its partners, and customers in many ways.

The second company that will be looked at is Jobster. Jobster is a company that was started to help jobseekers, but has since evolved to become a site where employers can go and interact with people who are looking for a job. According to Jobster (2007), "Jobster is the leading innovator in online recruitment technology. Thousands of employers rely on Jobster to connect with valuable audiences of active and passive candidates through a range of services for employers and recruiting teams of all sizes. *Whether you're looking to post jobs, search for candidates, feature your company on Facebook, or build a Talent Network of recruiting contacts, Jobster is here to help you connect* ".

These types of connections have had the benefit of making Jobster into a premier social networking site, along with allowing employers and potential employees the chance to meet where they might not have had that chance before. By having people create a profile and then be able to respond to questions and include others into their network of contacts which then can be expanded to link and network with many others, this makes it a viable source for all to use.

The last company that will be considered is Yelp. Yelp was founded to help people who were looking to find information about a company from the customers, and has since expanded to include other areas such as shops, eating, movies, and other recommendations. According to Yelp (2007):

Yelp is the fun and easy way to find, review and talk about what's great (and not so great) in your world. You already know that asking friends is the best way to find restaurants, dentists, hairstylists, and anything local. Yelp makes it fast and easy by collecting and organizing your friends' recommendations in one convenient place.

Yelp is...

...the ultimate city guide that taps into the community's voice and reveals honest and current insights on local businesses and services on everything from martinis to mechanics.

...just real people, writing real reviews, and that's the real deal.

...a fun and engaging place for passionate and opinionated influencers to share the experiences they've had with local businesses and services.

...the definitive local guide in the San Francisco Bay Area and a force to be reckoned with in Chicago, New York, Boston, Los Angeles and Seattle. But really, we're everywhere. From Austin to Madison and everywhere in between, reviews are coming in from all over the country!

...word of mouth marketing - amplified. Savvy local marketers now have a great channel to effectively target local consumers.

Since July 2004, co-founders Jeremy Stoppelman (CEO) and Russel Simmons (CTO) and their Yelp crew have been striving to make life better for people who love to patronize great local businesses. Discovering accurate information on local establishments has never been this entertaining. Writing reviews has never been this fun, easy and addictive!

It can be noticed from the above that a site originally intended for one purpose has morphed into various others, and provides a useful and daily social networking venue for many people.

By creating this type of community where people can communicate by responding to a review that someone has written and posted on the website as soon as the post is placed there, Yelp has made it possible for giving many people the ability to communicate and to exchange information of many types, which they might not have otherwise been able to do or had a desire to do so.

Conclusion

It can be seen that social networking sites are growing in use from small companies to large companies, and that this trend is getting bigger every day. People naturally like to communicate with each other, to exchange ideas on almost any subject, and online social networking has evolved to the extent where it is now possible to provide this as if the participants were in the same room.

With the ability to communicate in this manner, the fact that another person could be hundreds or even thousands of miles away fades and becomes insignificant, for now it is possible to create a network for a person that can span vast distance compared to what was available in the past. In the coming years, it is likely that the technology will continue to advance and make it

so that one might have a portable device that would present a image of others where they are located and allow one to see objects as well as talk to others, as well as larger devices that would do this.

By bringing people together in this way, social networking is a technology that has made it possible for people to advance the number of ways in which communication is done, and will continue to grow and improve to allow for more ways for people to network and be productive and happy.

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