

# Social Collaboration

## Solving Wickedly Difficult Problems

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Anyone who's worked in a large group knows one simple truth: getting things done is way more difficult than it should be. Organizations are not aligned around common goals. They too often waste what should be a competitive advantage: the collective expertise, skills and capabilities within the organization. Or, as Lew Platt of Hewlett-Packard once put it, "If only HP knew what HP knows, we would be three times more productive."

The hard problems that organizations face aren't getting any easier either. If anything, they're becoming more difficult as organizations themselves become larger and more complex. Certainly there are efficiencies of scale that attend big organizations—that's why they form in the first place—but size also has disadvantages. The ability to solve hard problems is one of them. But there is hope.

New collaboration tools, powered by social media features, have the potential to turn organizational complexity from a hindrance to a genuine advantage. They provide the ability to leverage expertise and talent in offices thousands of miles from each other, bring that expertise and talent together instantly when appropriate to solve a specific problem and support those same teams over long periods of time. It can take an organization's best minds and connect them together in powerful ways. It can take organizational complexity, in other words, and turn it into organizational effectiveness.

For an example, look no further than the US intelligence community (IC). A federation of 16 separate United States government agencies, the IC probably isn't on anyone's top 10 list of cutting-edge entrepreneurial organizations. Maybe it should be. What the IC is doing with social collaboration is a lesson for the rest of us on how to use this new technology to find answers to wickedly difficult problems.

### Applying The Lessons Of War

While businesses everywhere are trying to understand what social media and social collaboration are all about, the IC gets it. The IC understands that preventing the next 9/11, accurately assessing the capabilities of enemies and disrupting their networks before they can launch deadly attacks—solving, in other words, very

difficult problems—requires mining huge amounts of information, finding patterns in seemingly disconnected bits of data and tapping expertise of a wide group of people, including people working separately on completely unrelated issues.

Social collaboration—which is what happens when you apply social media technology to business collaboration—creates a way for information to rapidly diffuse throughout organizations like the intelligence community. Social collaboration allows teams to form instantly and ad hoc to review and respond to information as a team rather than as individuals. And it enables fast identification of experts on the new random topic of the hour: *Anyone here speak Urdu and Kurdish, know Spanish geography and have expertise in llama imports?*

The wickedly difficult problems that the IC faces may have greater life-and-death consequences than those most businesses face, but they share some features in common. Wicked problems typically have entangled issues, numerous unaligned stakeholders and often a lack of basic agreement on the goals. In business, these include problems such as: how to innovate more effectively; how to determine strategic direction; how and when to initiate an M&A strategy; how to implement a completely new business model; how to design and launch products that the market is asking for; how to solve problems in technology, medicine or the sciences. And so on.

Properly leveraged, social collaboration can attack the wicked problems of business by enabling us to solve problems as teams that we can't as individuals. This requires a shift in thinking—a new paradigm.

In corporate America, the prevailing norm is still the idea that knowledge is power. Expertise is valued. People hoard knowledge because it gives them control. Furthermore, individuals are encouraged to hide challenges and issues to avoid blame, rather than bring them to the larger team to solve.

In a collaborative model, by contrast, sharing is power. The more knowledge and information people give away, the greater their influence. We certainly see that in the blogosphere—and increasingly in business as well. Social collaboration both empowers the individual expert to

contribute more broadly and elevates the importance of the collaborative team. Such teams become greater than the sum of their parts. Strengths are amplified and weaknesses minimized.

### New Technology For A New Paradigm

If you set out to acquire a new technology that will help you achieve the goal of enabling the people in your organization to solve your biggest challenges, what should you look for?

- ◆ Look for a system that will capture small bits of knowledge, not just formal documents or even wikis. Social media tools can facilitate and capture questions and answers, comments, remarks and corrections. In a good system, these bits of knowledge will all be indexed and retrievable—with references to the people who contributed them;
- ◆ You need a system that promotes "ambient awareness"—that is, the ability of knowledge workers to be aware of relevant information without being distracted by anything meaningless or irrelevant. Critical information should present itself as such; and
- ◆ Your social collaboration system should have a really good search engine. This search should not only identify content, in the form of docs, comments, Q&A and wikis, but should also identify the person who generated that content, and communities, projects or networks where that activity is taking place.

With these capabilities, technology will do the following:

- ◆ Help people across the enterprise get to know one another so they can work together. That implies a Facebook-like interface where employees can create their own profiles;
- ◆ Provide a shared workspace where teams can form, contribute work, aggregate work and iterate on work. The entire process of doing work is captured as content and then becomes a foundation for new corporate knowledge;
- ◆ Enable communication so people can discuss problems and solutions, tag discussions for later review and stayed focused on the task at hand, regardless of time zone or geographical boundaries; and
- ◆ Allow individuals and teams to tap into the collective intelligence and expertise of the organization so that people can leverage insight, existing work and work currently in progress by other teams or individuals.

Together these capabilities enable your workforce to tackle the wickedly hard problems in ways they simply couldn't before. ■

Learn more about how Open Text Social Media can help your organization tap into its collective intelligence to solve your biggest, thorniest, most wickedly wicked problems: please visit us at [www.opentext.com](http://www.opentext.com)