

## **Extracting Knowledge in a 2.0 Fashion**

### **Enterprise 2.0, why do it?**

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We hear often that Enterprise 2.0 can benefit any organization that wants to improve collaboration between employees, foster the development of business-critical relationships, connect dispersed workforces, or speed up and improve innovation. Few experienced business managers would argue with the validity of those goals. But because the term Enterprise 2.0 is relatively new and, quite frankly, does not by itself really mean anything, it can be difficult for business managers to understand specific ways in which the tools of Enterprise 2.0 can benefit their organization.

The iterations of Enterprise 2.0 are as varied and as numerous as the strategic goals a business can have – that is to say, they are limited only by the human imagination and are therefore infinite. Often, though, businesses choose to begin with Enterprise 2.0 as a knowledge discovery solution. For the purposes of illustrating why a business might choose to employ Enterprise 2.0, then, I will focus on that goal.

### **Knowledge Extraction**

A long-time client of ours – a manager at a professional services organization -- relates this experience: *I have completed, just this morning, editing a video project for my company's employees. This video is the second in a series I've titled the "Silo Busting" series because of the series' goal of revealing to our widely dispersed employee base what work besides their own is going on at the company – i.e., busting open the occupational silos in which people spend their days in an effort to create awareness of the full spectrum of expertise present in the organization.*

*Between the two videos I've now completed, I've managed to create profiles of four of this company's 220 employees. Total time invested to complete the two videos: taking into account planning, scheduling, filming and editing, approximately 40 hours.*

*I cannot let go of my goal with the Silo Busting series – that of creating broader, and persistent awareness among our employees of the work their peers are doing. I know such awareness will improve client service, problem solving and innovation throughout the organization. But with 40 hours of work under my belt to produce cursory overviews of the work of only four employees at one static moment in time I'm faced with the reality that my chosen communication model is hardly scalable. If I'm to reveal the work and expertise of 220 employees, and do so in a way that reveals their ongoing accomplishments, and their growing expertise -- not just a snapshot of where they are today -- how many hours of work will that require? And what is the cost of that model?*

Clearly, if the goal of increasing employees' visibility into one another's work is important (and for any company that trades in knowledge, benefits from innovation, or generates and needs to process data efficiently, it is) then, for this client, a new communication model is called for.

## **Emergent Knowledge**

What is called for in this situation is a communication model where business knowledge does not need to be extracted in a slow and labor-intensive process. Rather what is needed is a model in which such knowledge collects as part of employees' normal work activities and is made immediately available for use by others. A model in which understanding of the work going on in the company is not rooted in the single moment in which it was recorded, rather one in which understanding moves forward with the work, in real time. What is called for is a communication model in which details about what the company is doing, about who knows what when, about how business problems are being solved across the company's myriad client engagements simply collects as the work is being done.

What is called for is a model in which employees' time can be spent using information, not looking for it.

What's called for here is an emergent knowledge model.

In an emergent model, information can be collected over time, grows in depth as people participate in regular work activities, and can be opened up for additions by the employees themselves. Think of diverting a river into a reservoir.

That model of emergent awareness is a central element of Enterprise 2.0.

## **The Emergent Knowledge Model In Action: Employee Profiles**

Though it is perhaps not difficult to understand the value of providing regular, detailed insight into the broad spectrum of work going on within an organization, it can be difficult to envision specific tools that can make such insight possible – or perhaps, more to the point: can make it practical.

Many organizations are finding that employee profiling systems that include some elements of social networking applications provide a useful starting point.

Traditional Employee Profiling Systems have included a small handful of static information categories that, when filled out, provide a definition of the employee that is true in the moment that it's completed, but may not remain true as the employee progresses in their employment. Look at a corporate profile system and you're likely to see:

- Name and title
- Educational background
- Placement in the organizational hierarchy
- Location and contact information
- List of skills and interests

Slightly more or less than that might be included, but generally speaking, traditional profile systems are like baseball trading cards: No one would argue that the stats weren't once true, but what's more critical to know is what's true now.

Unfortunately without a vigilant corporate policy governing upkeep of the profile information, they too often fall into disrepair so that, if there is information there, it's woefully out of date except for those periodic and widely spaced moments when it gets updated, or the information people want is absent altogether because employees are simply too busy to fill them out adequately, and because the categories have been defined by management in an abstracted attempt to extract something valuable rather than the idea of what is valuable information remaining with the employees to define. The same

company I spoke of above periodically asks its employees to update their profile sites with very little success because the updating requires that employees stop work and spend precious time in pursuit of an abstract benefit. It's the information extraction problem I spoke of above.

Enterprise 2.0 emphasizes making information discoverable, sharing information for the common good and, apropos to this discussion, making sharing automatic rather than conscious.

Two common elements of an Enterprise 2.0 environment, when added to an employee profiling system, can transform the system from a time-intensive knowledge-extraction environment to an organic, free-flowing, knowledge emergence environment:

**Activity Streams** – Think of Facebook or FriendFeed to understand this model. In both of those consumer applications, as users add content to the system or to other applications that are hooked to the system – applications like Twitter, YouTube, or a blog, for example – a notice of (and a link to) that content appears automatically in the activity stream of the host application. Add a picture somewhere on Facebook, it shows up in your newsfeed; share a link on Twitter, it appears in the stream on Friendfeed. The same visibility can be achieved by tying employee profile systems into employee knowledge management systems like an intranet – wherever your employees store, share or collaborate on the material they're working on. Add an activity stream to the employee's profile page that captures and displays all their work activity conducted on the intranet site. Peers can visit the activity stream on the profile page periodically to catch up, or they can simply follow along persistently and always have an up-to-the-moment view into what you're doing, with whom you're interacting and what you know.

**Tagging** – Broadly defined, "tagging" is the application of descriptive keywords to pieces of content to help categorize that content within the content system and to make it more discoverable in future searches. Enterprise 2.0 tagging systems leverage grassroots, social input and allow employees to freely add tags that describe content in ways that are relevant to them. Within employee profiling systems, tagging can aid in the goal of creating emergent knowledge environments because tags can be applied to both content and people.

- *Tagging Of Content* – Within a company's knowledge management system – such as an intranet – as employees add documents, they can add descriptive tags to define the contents of the document. As they post blog updates, they can tag the update to define it's contents. As they collaborate in wiki environments, they can add tags to the wiki content to define it. You get the picture: by giving employees the ability to add tags to the content, you give them some control over how it's categorized and you increase its discoverability in future searches, both because there is now a more robust set of meta data associated with the content, but more importantly because the content has been defined in terms that are relevant to the employees that will use it.
- *Tagging Of People* – It's not just content that employees want to find inside their organizations, it's expertise too. Many organizations now allow peers to add tag definitions to one another's profiles as a way of making those individuals and their expertise more discoverable to the company at large. The consulting firm Booz, Allen, Hamilton, for example, lets every employee add a series of tags to their own profile defining what they see as their own expertise, but they also let employees tag each other as they work together so over time two sets of tags emerge – the employee's view and his/her peers' view.

By adding activity streams and tagging to the employee profiles – and by exposing the tags in scanable groupings (a tag cloud) that grow as the employee completes more and more activities and interacts with more peers, and by giving employees the ability to create or edit tags at any time -- you create a situation in which the definition of every employee -- their expertise, their list of contributions, their set of professional experience -- is immediately and persistently visible, always accessible and is constantly growing and evolving. You create a situation in which useful knowledge about what is happening in the organization and about who knows what in the organization no longer needs to be extracted through labor and time intensive special projects, it simply emerges as employees do their work and interact with each other.

You create a situation in which employees don't have to look for information; they can simply put to use the information that is now all around them. You create a situation in which information accrues around employees and that information becomes available for the benefit of their peers.

### **Implications/Strategic question to answer before implementing an emergent knowledge solution**

In his paper "*Emergent Knowledge, The Spark That Ignites Information Advantage*", author Chunka Mui writes that "Emergent knowledge has long been a driver of business innovation". I think it's easy to see how that can be true – what you don't know can hurt you, what you do know can help you. If you can expose more useful information with less effort, you gain a competitive advantage.

But only if you add one more critical element, as Mui alludes to here:

"Rather than use emergent knowledge in a haphazard manner, organizations should systematically nurture, organize and leverage the knowledge in the organization's planning and decision-making process."

That is to say, you can build the systems to allow for emergent knowledge, you can build tools, like the profiling system we discussed, to collect the knowledge as it emerges. But before you turn on the system to start collecting the knowledge as it emerges, you need to answer the question of how you will use what collects.

Without a strategy for channeling emergent knowledge back into the strategic planning of the company, you're really just piling things up. Water can only produce electricity when you channel it through hydro-electric turbines; emergent knowledge can only produce competitive advantage when you channel it through a process of analysis that reveals strategic opportunities in the new flow of information.

As an example, the client company I spoke of in the video project example that opened this paper currently has five established lines of business. They want to use an emergent knowledge profiling system to better inform and empower employees already working in those established lines. But they will likely find, once they begin collecting the knowledge which emerges, that other expertise exists within the company that they had not previously recognized, or that expertise that they had identified in small amounts exists in quantities greater than anticipated and in quantities great enough to warrant establishing additional lines of business. They need a process for identifying the opportunities inherent in the emergent knowledge and a process for acting on it efficiently so that they gain the strategic advantage that is the potential of an emergent knowledge solution.

That, however, is a topic for another time.