

Implementing Enterprise 2.0 knowledge sharing tools in a Eastern European consultancy

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Abstract

Enterprise 2.0 technologies are being introduced to support cutting-edge knowledge management in many companies. They are however, poorly known in Eastern European countries. This article presents a case study of the implementation of three major Enterprise 2.0 tools in a Eastern European consultancy firm. The tools include social bookmarking, wikis and social authoring, and the article examines how the software was introduced, benefits sought, actual usage and difficulties encountered. Conclusions are offered as recommendations for further implementation.

Enterprise 2.0 technologies were defined by Andrew McAfee as “social software used in the context of activities in an enterprise” (1), software characterized by the SLATES acronym: Search, Links, Authoring, Tagging, Extensions, Signaling. These technologies are making a slow inroad into enterprises everywhere; but they are particularly poorly known and used in Eastern European companies. In fact, not many case studies are available in general. In order to fill this gap, Andrew McAfee, the proponent of the Enterprise 2.0 concept, created a website (2) to invite the participants in online communities from different companies to share their own experiences. The website has been active since June 2007, but to date (February 2009) it only contains 20 case studies which are sometimes quite hastily sketched.

The following case study is based on the author’s own observation of the usage of these technologies in a small management consultancy firm in Romania, and presents usage of three Enterprise 2.0 software examples: social bookmarking, wikis and collaborative authoring. We examine how the software was introduced, how it was used, and the critical factors in its success or failure.

The company we present in this case study has been present on the Romanian market for three years and offers business consulting services - starting with feasibility studies and up to specialized services for real estate developers interested in the sustainability of their buildings. As some of the services offered are new on the Romanian market, a good deal of innovation is necessary for business development. Furthermore, the knowledge of the team and efficient collaboration represent the main competitive advantage of the firm. The firm’s consultants (a team of six, with another six persons providing support and administrative roles) use a personal computer with high-speed Internet access most of the time, often even during meetings to support note-taking. As the work is often provided to foreign investors and the firm occasionally employs MBA interns from other countries, the language used in English. As part of the firm’s sustainability agenda, the team has an objective to use as little paper as possible, which

makes it much easier to introduce information flows based on computerized technologies.

The status of the information flows before the introduction of the Enterprise 2.0 technologies was mostly emails and documents available to individual users (thus emails sent were lost to new team members) and numerous meetings. Very often a document was sent back and forth by email among many participants to obtain participation in the final result. If the document was edited by more than one person at the same time, the main author was tasked with integrating the changes - a time-consuming process. Information relating to business development, the business network and potential clients were shared primarily through discussions, and often the same information was shared redundantly and inefficiently.

We will now focus on three of the technologies which were introduced, the manner in which they were used, the degree of uptake, costs, and benefits and challenges encountered by the users.

Social bookmarking

The first Enterprise 2.0 technology introduced to the firm was social bookmarking, through the usage of the free and accessible platform - del.icio.us.

The decision to introduce the platform was based on the following:

- The consultants spend a considerable amount of time searching for information on the internet.
- Information, once found and assessed as valuable to the firm’s activity, can very easily be lost and should be easily found again. (Very often team member said: I know I found relevant information somewhere, but I can’t remember what website that was.)
- Every consultant regularly reads news and other information that might yield results useful for future activity. If the information cannot easily be recovered when it can actually be used, the value of the regular updating is greatly diminished.

- The company has several areas of interest that are very well-defined, and thus it is necessary to collect valuable and useful information on these topics to support business development.
- It is important that every person joining the firm be able to quickly read through the best information sources already identified by colleagues.
- The consultants have observed that they waste time looking for information they know they have already found or that has been found by other colleagues.

Because the del.icio.us platform does not require any cash investment and is very well-developed, the firm decided to use this platform to save webpages with useful information, to organize these by the use of freely-attributed tags, and to share information with colleagues. This platform is not designed for enterprise use, and therefore it does not offer the option of limited-access groups. In other words, any page, once saved, can be visualized by anyone. This was not considered to be a deterrent by the firm in question, as the information was public from the beginning.

At the launch of the project, it was necessary to agree on some common conventions in the tagging system. This is necessary for any group that wants to implement free tagging, but the conventions are very simple and their primary role is to facilitate cooperation and avoid redundancy. The main conventions were:

- For tags containing multiple words, an underscore character was used to unite them (example: green_building); this was necessary because the platform interprets the space between the words as a separator between tags.
- Each tag begins with a lowercase character, unless the tag in question is an acronym (in which case, all characters will be uppercase: CEE)
- Words in the tag are used in the singular, unless it is imperative that they be used in the plural.

- When a team collaborates in research, it is necessary for the members to define before starting the work which terms will be used to tag the webpages that will be found.

The interface is very simple. In the main part of the page, there is a list of the pages saved, together with the tags which characterize each of them. On the right hand side, there is a tag cloud which shows, by category, all the tags used and indicate, through the size of the font, the frequency with which the tag has been used.

It is very simple then see the pages saved by the entire group by searching for a predefined tag or tag combination. There might appear some difficulties in this search if the tags are used by other platform users who are not part of the group; however, for the purposes of this firm, this resulted not so much in difficulties but in a new source of information that had been selected and quality-checked.

Another great benefit of the system is the elimination of links sent via email. Such information is very often lost, as the receiving person does not have time to read the page when the link was sent, and thus valuable information does not reach the intended receiver. The alternative solution offered by del.icio.us is tagging specific pages as “for someone”. These pages appear in the “Links for you” section, as seen in the next sample. Each receiver can then choose to save pages which were sent to him or her and tag them as they see fit. Many users here employ “action tags”, such as “to read”. In any case, all the pages ever sent by a colleague remain visible in the “Links for you” section, and the process for sending links is through the same interface that allows the saving of the own pages, through the simple addition of a new tag: for:colleague.

The system was launched in June 2006; at an evaluation two years later, the degree of utilization differs widely from one consultant to another - some consultants have up to 100 pages saved, others over 1000. This means that the system is used only at a medium level. The team continues to send a good amount of interesting links by email.

Wiki

Starting in June 2007, the firm introduced a wiki system, a type of intranet page that can be edited by multiple persons in a dynamic manner. The initial software used was MediaWiki (the same that is used by Wikipedia), but - although the usage was active and enthusiastic - difficulties were encountered due to the fact that this system uses code to format the text, not a WYSIWYG system (What you see is what you get, system that is used by most modern word processors, including Microsoft Word, and which is familiar to most software users). Therefore, it was decided to try another system. After an intermediary time using Drupal - a system that was not liked at all by the participants and due to which the system was poorly used for some time - the final choice rested upon the MindTouch DekiWiki system, which is simple to use and does not require training.

The initial page contains both technical information regarding the usage of the system and indications on how to best use the platform to communicate, collaborate and share knowledge. The system allows both the hierarchical navigation of content and the usage of tags to define the content on each page. Furthermore, it is very simple to observe which content was recently modified and who contributed to the changes.

Here are some of the usage scenarios encountered:

Project management

To organize a recent conference, the wiki was used to share knowledge, to save and access files that must be used by multiple persons, to note procedures and modify them, to share response formulas and email texts which were used on a repeated basis.

To replace evaluation meetings

One of the most interesting usage cases of the wiki was encountered about two months after the launch. The firm had organized an event, and

as usual after an event there should have been a meeting to evaluate and draw learning points and to allocate tasks for the follow-up of the meeting. It was practically impossible for all colleagues to be in the office for the meeting within the next few days, so the event organizer used the wiki instead to organize the meeting. In less than 24 hours, the dedicated page was completed by detailed observations and commentaries from all team members, and the final result was much more useful than the usual meeting.

The main reasons for the success of this method were:

- The relevancy of the discussion. The page was created as soon as the event had taken place; when the team members came to work the following day, they were greeted by a notification about the new wiki page, and thus the ideas and thoughts they would have had anyway were collected on the page. Results were much poorer when the wiki was used to generate ideas.
- The page was pre-populated with ideas and personal opinions by the organizer of the event. Some of these were rather controversial in nature. This contributed very much to creating a lively discussion through the “shared space” of the wiki. If the page had been left blank and the members of the team had been asked to write their ideas, the results would have been poorer.
- Participants in the discussion very quickly started to sign their contribution, using formulas like: “Gh. M.: I think that... “. This offered participants in the discussion the opportunity to follow the unfolding of ideas between people they know and encouraged participants to take responsibility, eliminating some of the negative effects of anonymity.
- The initial project manager took the initiative to define tasks. Some of these were allocated from the beginning to some persons, others were then taken on by participants in the discussion. This fact contributed to motivating the team members to actively participate in

the discussion, as those who did not actively participate were allocated tasks and those who participated actively could choose their own tasks.

- The final result was that each team member took less than 20 minutes to read the comments and contribute, whereas if this had been a traditional meeting, it would have taken 1 -1.5 hours of everyone's time.

To generate real-time shared lists

Some teams use wiki pages to list necessary office supplies, to keep lists of books necessary for the team or for a list of the events that would be of interest to the members, as they come up in the press.

To aid the initial process of orientations and training for colleagues

When the wiki is used in training new colleagues and contains the essential information they will need (starting with the technical details necessary to configure email accounts to information regarding contact details of the people in the company who can help in different situations), newcomers are involved in using these tools from the very beginning. Furthermore, they can participate in editing those sections that seem insufficiently clear or that are outdated. Thus, the wiki can be a handbook that is always updated and re-formulated to be better understood by its users. In a short while, those who have knowledge that is requested observe that it is easier to write the information on the wiki rather than be disturbed again and again to repeat for each new person joining the team. One solution that is successfully used by some people is to delegate the task of writing up the content on the wiki to the person who first asked: thus, the more valuable time of a manager or senior colleague is used in the best way possible, and the information received by one person becomes accessible to many in the future.

As a directory of team members

Each team member has a personal page that lists contact details, work experience and areas of knowledge. This page also contains information about conferences in which team members participated, and they use the page to easily share knowledge gathered.

Collaborative authoring

Though wikis allow multiple persons to generate content in a collaborative way, they also necessitate coordination between them, as the content cannot be edited at the same time. Therefore, other solutions for generating text in real time appeared. In other words, these solutions allow multiple people to view in their web browser an interface very similar to a text editor, with the unique characteristic of collaborative real-time support. Changes made by each person appear on the other person's screen real-time.

The best-used of these systems is Google Docs, and it is used in the following ways by this firm:

- To allow the client to have access at any time to the document being prepared for him. Thus, the client has the option to offer his own views at any stage in the project, greatly increasing his chances of being happy with the end result.
- To allow a team to perform research together, without having to assign a part of the research to each individual member. In this case, each has the opportunity to see at any moment the information gathered and written up by his colleagues, and thus redundancy will be minimized. The teams that collaborate in this way discover that they can coordinate their work quite well without needing a project coordinator to divide the tasks and put together the pieces produced by each participant.
- To maintain various documents and texts in a collaborative way, without the necessity of sending the document repeatedly by email to multiple people and then consolidating their

contributions. In this way were prepared some press releases, texts for the website, emails for partners and responses to difficult situations.

Conclusions

Based on these case studies, we maintain that Enterprise 2.0 tools can be successfully implemented in a Eastern European country. The tools seem to be better received when they can readily be integrated into existing work practices, when there is a strong champion of the system in

the team, and when the benefits are clear both at a personal and an organizational level.

References

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