Applying Analytics to Enterprise Social Networks to Improve Business Performance

MANY COMPANIES HAVE BEEN USING ENTERPRISE SOCIAL NETWORKS (ESNs) for some time and find value in the way they improve employee communications and collaboration. But imagine the additional value that ESNs could deliver if companies could mine the vast amounts of data they create for the nuggets of information that would help them make better, data-informed decisions to solve business problems.

A well-integrated ESN touches many different applications within an organization, putting it in a good position to act as enterprise data aggregator, collecting information from various corners of the company. Mining this data can help companies get a sense for employee behaviors and attitudes by analyzing what they’re discussing, what they’re most interested in, how they’re interacting with others and more.

To date, such people-focused data has been nearly impossible to gather outside of the occasional employee survey, but ESNs supply it in abundance. Once you’ve targeted a business challenge with which an ESN can help, the trick is to apply analytics to glean intelligence from the data the community generates. That intelligence can then be applied to a business goal or challenge to help the company make better decisions. While this type of analysis is still in its early stages, this paper will discuss what’s possible today and where things are headed for companies that want to become more data-driven.
The role of the ESN in the enterprise

TO UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU CAN DO with the data ESNs provide you must first understand what ESNs are, and the roles they play in an enterprise. At the simplest level, an ESN is a business-focused internal social networking platform for an organization. It enables employees to connect with one another about issues, have conversations and share information in real time.

Companies typically go through three stages of ESN use. The first is utilizing the platform for basic communications and quick messages. Stage 2 is sharing documents and collaborating around them. Essentially, files are to ESNs what photos are to Facebook. Employees post them within a conversation thread and have conversations around them, collaborating to get work done.

The ultimate value of the ESN comes at Stage 3, when it is used to improve workflows. This is when the ESN becomes embedded in other applications, such as wikis, intranets, CRM, HRM and other systems used by different groups across the company.

Consider the example of a salesperson who has an opportunity with a certain prospect. Using a tool such as Socialcast, the VMware ESN, he or she can embed a conversation within Salesforce asking whether others have any insight about the prospect that may help close the sale. Maybe some colleagues have relationships with employees at the firm and can provide advice on issues the company is having, or offer insights into its financial status. The salesperson can receive all this information from within the Salesforce.com application. Social capabilities can be embedded in whatever application an employee is using.

In the course of playing host to all these conversations, files, images and other content, ESNs collect a vast amount of data. In the example above, companies can find value not only in the information about the prospect, but also about how various employees helped the salesperson make the sale (or failed to help, as the case may be). Analyzing behaviors to understand what is most effective in accomplishing a goal, such as closing a sale, could lead to new best practices, employee training, new content that needs to be developed, or many other actions to improve business effectiveness.

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Mining ESN data

AT THE MOST BASIC LEVEL, analytics allow companies to discover what conversations, behaviors and use cases resonate with employees. That data, in turn, can be used to help encourage more active use of the ESN.

For example, organizations can determine which individuals are contributing the most to the community and reward that behavior, while nudging those who are sitting on the sidelines to pick up their activity. All the while, companies can generate reports to keep track of overall use and ensure activity is trending in the right direction.

Data-driven performance reviews

CONSIDER HOW ESN ANALYTICS may be applied to a use case that is familiar to organizations of any size: the employee performance review.
Currently the performance review process goes something like this: A manager evaluates the goals laid out in the last performance review and whether they were met. Some companies may employ a 360-degree review process, which includes employee self-reflection as well as feedback from others who routinely interact with the employee, including peers, subordinates and supervisors. Typically, managers factor in whatever they may have observed or happen to remember about the employee’s performance over the review period, which is typically six months or more.

This process suffers from several flaws. Aside from assessing whether employees met their goals, which is not always black and white, the process is almost entirely subjective. It relies on opinions from others and, to a large extent, the manager’s own memory and limited observations of the employee.

As a result, the true contributions and value of any given employee to the organization is not necessarily assessed accurately. That means when it comes time to promote one employee versus another, the company may well make the wrong decision. The employee who feels slighted may be prompted to leave the organization. The whole process invites office politics, with employees stepping on each other’s toes and blowing their own horns to make themselves look good at the expense of their colleagues—with little regard for what may be best for the company.

Now consider what the process may look like when a company conducts annual employee reviews that incorporate data gleaned from the ESN. This can include “soft identity” data, meaning the picture that emerges of an employee from the level of participation, and what the employee contributes to in the social network.

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Collectively, all this information gives the manager a better understanding of employees’ expertise and the extent to which they engage with their colleagues. It gives a sense of an employee’s influence in the social network and paints a much clearer, data-driven picture of who the most effective employees really are. When you add this kind of information to the performance review process, you can more accurately identify top performers in the organization and work to retain the best talent. It also fosters a company culture based on transparency and performance, where employees are recognized for contributions that were previously not visible. This leads to increased job satisfaction and ensures employee performance is aligned with the company’s goals and mission.

**Improved executive communications**

**Typically,** when executives have some important information to communicate they simply send an email. Perhaps they can get statistics as to whether employees open the email, but that’s about it; they have no idea whether any given employee reads and understands the message or, more importantly, acts on it.

If the same message is instead posted in the ESN, the response is likely to be immediate. Companies can see whether it starts any conversations and, if so, what kinds of things employees are saying. Response rates can be tracked by role, including executives, managers and front-line employees.

Over time, analyzing this type of information can help executives tailor their messages to generate greater conversation around a topic. Maybe messages that are shorter or more conversational in nature garner better response, helping people feel more engaged, as though they’re part of the conversation—and not just being talked to. At the same time, executives learn how employees feel about issues and become more engaged with them. When done well, the process fosters a culture of openness and transparency, where employees feel like they have a voice.
Calling all ideas

ANOTHER AREA WHERE THE SOCIAL NETWORK can play an important role is innovation. All companies want to accelerate the rate at which they innovate and move new products through research and development and into the field.

With an ESN such as Socialcast, companies can track certain message types, such as “idea.” A company that’s interested in generating more ideas from employees can put out the word—via the ESN, email, posters and the like—to encourage employees to use the ESN to submit ideas. Socialcast has tools that enable users to vote on which ideas they like best and, of course, comment on any submitted ideas.

A company can then measure how many ideas are being posted, and which ones are generating the most conversation and getting the highest ratings. If the goal is to get more ideas, the company can incent this behavior by rewarding those who come up with ideas that gain high marks and lots of conversation. Companies can even measure the extent to which people are collaborating with one another to take a germ of an idea and turn it into an actual product—and again reward that behavior.

VMware and Social Business Intelligence

SOCIALCAST IS IN THE FOREFRONT of a new era in ESNs, one in which companies analyze the massive amounts of data generated by their communities to get insights into human behavior that up until now were not measurable. This data, when combined with other existing business data, can be a powerful tool in formulating strategy, developing employees, delivering new products, streamlining processes and more.

Socialcast includes a feature called Social Business Intelligence (SBI), which provides a series of dashboards that quickly and easily give companies insight into community dynamics within the Socialcast community. With SBI, users can generate charts and graphs that show who their top commenters are, the top posts and groups, and which items are trending. They can see who their advanced, engaged users are and which ones are not participating, then take steps to find out why.

SBI also includes APIs that enable it to plug into any other Socialcast-enabled applications including ERP, CRM or human resources, allowing SBI to collect data on conversations happening within those applications as well.

For companies that want to dig deeper and answer more complicated questions, Socialcast also offers professional services. The company’s Data Science Team works with customers to understand what business issues they want to address and how they can mine Socialcast data to help.

ESNs: An untapped source of business intelligence

FORWARD-THINKING COMPANIES understand the value in becoming a social business. They are adding social capabilities to myriad enterprise applications to bring all work-related activity into a single source of truth—the ESN.

Because ESNs connect into the business applications employees use every day, they are in a unique position to act as a repository for a vast amount of data that traditionally has not been accessible in one place. With a tool like SBI, companies can mine that data and turn it into corporate intelligence to help them achieve their business goals. Ask the right questions, with the right goal in mind, and you’ll get back better information than was ever possible before.

Delivering products faster, keeping executives in tune with employees, ensuring employees are rewarded for their contributions—these are just a few of the tangible business benefits companies can achieve by gleaning intelligence from their social networks.

To find out more about Socialcast and SBI, go to www.socialcast.com