

Role of social business software in delivering innovation

 By [Gys Kappers](#)

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Businesses today operate within a dynamic environment, shaped by variables, such as evolving legislation, globalisation and economic volatility. Disruptive new technologies create new competitors overnight and the only way to get and stay in front is constantly to innovate.

Innovation is sometimes thought of as the product of inspiration - a spark of genius whose timing or vessel cannot be predicted, or a closed process driven by research and development. In fact, creativity can be cultivated as a habit - by anyone - and it is better when it draws on more ideas.

By using a democratic, collaborative approach to innovation - called "open innovation" - companies can nurture an innovative capability and increase their output of quality ideas, thus increasing their chances of bringing about or weathering disruptive market change and gaining a competitive edge.

Stories abound of market-leading companies that do not respond to disruptive changes in their field of play with a more open approach to innovation. Once great, they find themselves unable to recreate the spark, as they are too set in their assumptions to deal properly with shifting realities. Inevitably, they fail.

One example is Eastman Kodak. The inventors and market leaders in photographic film for over a century filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in America at the beginning of 2012. ZDNet noted that while the company had actually made a latter-day innovative breakthrough with the first digital camera, it failed to respond to the erosion of its monopolistic hold over film and film development, brought about by the commoditisation of the digital camera by Sony and others.

Bitter defeat

Others, too, have tasted bitter defeat by not ably responding to change. Nokia, the world's leading mobile phone producer, lost more than USD18 billion in market capitalisation when Apple created an irresistible wave of change with the iPhone. The resulting smart phone innovation went unmatched by anyone for years - certainly not by Nokia.

Then, suddenly, Samsung overtook Apple in global smart phone shipments. The difference? Samsung is a dyed-in-the-wool open company (unlike Apple) that taps its workforce and partners as well as the competitive landscape for ideas. The results speak for themselves.

Open companies communicate well, but traditional communications technologies haven't kept up. Many comms channels have proliferated over the years, giving rise to an overwhelming range of ways to stay in touch, but none that offers an

open, collaborative environment - one that everyone is at home in and in which their contribution is given equal weight and visibility.

Email doesn't lend itself to elegant mass participation or visibility. Intranets have become notice boards with little chance of interactive discussion. Collaborative platforms do not include sophisticated communications that are so necessary for idea sharing. And unified communications platforms (videoconferencing, IP telephony, white boards etc) are expensive.

A new breed of "social business software"

Of late, social technologies have entered the corporate consciousness. A new breed of "social business software" (SBS) platforms, also known as enterprise social software, uses social principles in a business context, offering great promise for inclusive, structured brainstorming within communities. They take the form of social and networked modifications to corporate intranets and communications software platforms or standalone SBS platforms.

SBS, itself a disruptive change in the market, combines and integrates "sharing" features of social media sites with collaboration and standard unified communications support, giving company stakeholders a collective or group-based platform within which to contribute to the corporate conversation, with the safety and equality that comes with openness.

It is clear that a company of information workers who communicate better will also increase their workplace and project efficiencies. In addition, they will co-create better, more nuanced ideas - faster. And more efficient companies that have better ideas stand a better chance of leading markets.

Platforms like WyzeTalk, Yammer and Jive have been successful at "ideation" or the seeding, testing and framing of ideas within companies. They harness the untapped brilliance of individuals on the strength of the principle that many heads are better than one, provided their cross-pollination is managed systematically. Collaboration-driven SBS tools provide that systematic, open approach to innovation.

Since the introduction of this nascent (two-year-old) field in South Africa, leading companies in health care, financial services, mining, software, retail and hospitality have embraced it to create workplace efficiencies, knowledge and best-practice sharing, and communication.

As a result of implementing SBS successfully (a certain amount of change management is essential), excellent ideas need not be wasted. They will be given the exposure that is traditionally reserved for inner-circle employees, subjected to open scrutiny and a wide array of potentially complimentary or better ideas, earning individuals and companies the recognition that might otherwise have been denied them forever.

ABOUT GYS KAPPERS

Gys Kappers is CEO of WyzeTalk. He is an experienced businessman and entrepreneur who is passionate about the role of business and the Open Innovation paradigm
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