

## Knowledge in Action - Issue 30

# Liking social business: thinking out loud and evolving together

Social media tools have been fabulously successful at enthusing and connecting consumers. So, not surprisingly, organisations are looking to harness those collaborative and knowledge-sharing technologies to reshape their business practices. But many will be disappointed: a high proportion of 'social business' initiatives fail to deliver on their objectives.

Research undertaken by the Henley Forum—studying social business initiatives in five large organisations—has demonstrated that many of these failures may be avoidable, having their roots in cultural and behavioural reasons, and not technology. Pay attention to these cultural and behavioural issues, and social business benefits can be a much more attainable aspiration.



It's difficult to ignore the impact that social media is having on the world of business. According to estimates, four-fifths of organisations are introducing corporately-sponsored 'social business' activities and tools, intended to foster and encourage collaborative working and knowledge sharing.

But despite the undoubted scale of the investment involved, social business initiatives do not always deliver. Of the social business initiatives commenced during 2015, for instance, it has been estimated that 80% will not achieve the intended benefits.

To better understand the respective drivers of failure and success, the Henley Forum undertook an action research project during 2014, following the progress of five large public and private sector organisations as they deployed social business technologies over a period of eight months.

The conclusion: for social business activities to succeed in transforming an organisation into a more social business, three processes are essential. First, organisations must encourage engagement at all levels; second, they must evolve a framework to stimulate and bound the degree of interaction and learning; and third, they must roll out the change so as to most effectively encourage the 'viral spread' of the social business initiative in question.

**"To get people on board, it was really important to show people that it's part of what they have to do, and that social business can help them do it faster, and with more insight."**



### Encouraging engagement at all levels

No one can disagree with the goals to which most social business initiatives aspire. But while espousing a more connected and collaborative organisation may be enough to trigger an initial interest in social business, it won't sustain momentum.

Granted, there will be participation from enthusiasts—people who immediately recognise the benefits of working in a more open, autonomous, and informal way.

But for change to take root, and spread in a way that actually impacts upon 'business as usual', many more people will have to be convinced to change their safe and familiar behaviours, and actively engage.

Because only when someone is engaged in something do they bring all of themselves to the activity, and get involved to their fullest capacity. And research shows that for engagement to occur, people need to:

- Know why it matters for them to engage, and what the return on their engagement might be.
- Feel psychologically, emotionally and physically safe enough to get involved.
- Have the necessary psychological, emotional and physical resources to undertake what needs to be done.

So what does this mean for social business initiatives? All the evidence points to a need to link them to real business benefits that are tailored to the needs of the various constituencies involved—for instance, senior executives, middle level managers and experts, and operational teams.

Each group will have its needs and concerns, and it is important to personalise the message to each group, in order to address these.

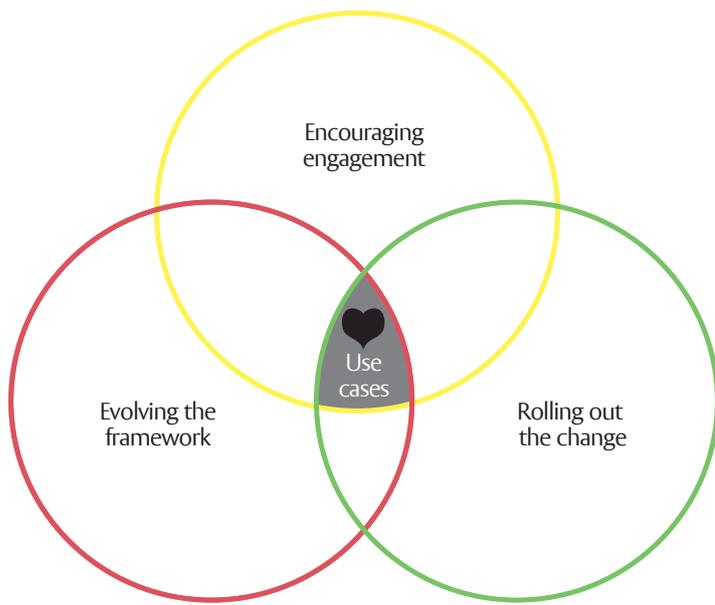
Various ways of doing this are possible, and organisations will wish to choose one that reflects their own internal culture. What is important is to view the whole process as an intervention intended to increase the productivity of a complex and interdependent ecosystem of groups and individuals, all of whom gain from the freedom to follow their passion, speak openly, and act autonomously.

All of the organisations taking part in the study found that collecting and publicising 'use cases' helped them to do this, by providing valuable 'green shoots' of evidence drawn from enthusiasts and early adopters.

### Collaboration, insight ... practical value

Co-ordinated by Professor Jane McKenzie and Dr Christine van Winkelen of Henley Business School, the insights into social business described here originated in a Henley Forum 'action research' project undertaken in 2014. Studying ongoing real-world social business initiatives, the project team included representatives from the National Audit Office, Euroclear, DSTL, Wipro, DEFRA, EDF Energy, and the Financial Ombudsman Service.

## The factors that together influence the effectiveness of social business implementation



Such real-world use case examples—which can be either forward-looking, retrospective, or even hypothetical—help to:

- Convince senior decision-makers that social business initiatives will deliver long-term improvements to the organisation.
- Inspire the more reticent users.
- Build momentum through reinforcing the message that this is genuinely a new way of doing business.

### Evolving a framework to stimulate and bound the degree of interaction

Sustaining momentum for change is a key element in turning an idea into becoming 'business as usual'. This requires a balance of stimulus and boundaries to hold the system in a state of development without lapsing into anarchy and chaos.

Some basic housekeeping helps with this—in particular, helping employees to understand and overcome the behavioural boundaries and technological boundaries that they will meet as they interact with each other through social business.

**Behavioural boundaries** are those encountered when people begin interacting more openly, engaging with others elsewhere in the organisation, and communicating with individuals who might be either senior or junior to them.

In some organisations, a formal code of conduct specifies acceptable business behaviour, and interacting through social business tools could be viewed as an extension to this. More generally, encouraging adherence to a few 'golden rules' goes a long

way to help: be respectful; apply common sense; if in doubt, don't post; and avoid saying things that might damage the corporate or group reputation.

**Technology boundaries** are those that must be addressed if people are to best understand where to find the type of information that they need, or where to post their own contributions. Otherwise, they may cluster around the wrong resource, and get frustrated when it doesn't deliver the expected benefits.

This is especially important when social business involves either separate social business tools, or a single over-arching social business tool with many facets. Generally, some parts of the system (or some discrete tools) will be best for conversations, others for testing opinion, others for answering questions with tried and tested advice, and yet others will be repositories for the more distilled results of careful investigation.

Real-world practical tips encountered in the research included:

- Focusing on user groups with a younger age distribution, which can help to increase early uptake, as younger users are more accustomed to social media.
- Building a critical mass of positive users, in order to create a tipping point that will draw others in.
- Timing the introduction of social business tools to coincide with headcount reduction, or restructuring, in order to help new people to get up to speed more quickly, and help existing employees to stay in touch when they have been moved to different parts of the business.
- Naming the social business tool in a way that quickly conveys its role in organisational life, allowing people to talk about it more easily and relate to its business value. Three out of the five organisations in our research had done this, and one had developed a suite of related names that also highlighted the different functions of the elements of the whole system.

*"If we did it again, we would spend more time with departmental leaders, making sure that they understood why we were doing it."*



“Showing people that they could use social business for technical benchmarking was really powerful. They did not have to find a room, but could do it as and when they wanted. Everyone could have their say, not just those that spoke loudest, and it was not necessary to reach a consensus, because everyone could vote separately.”



### Rolling out the change so as to encourage ‘viral spread’

The process of successfully rolling out social business initiatives involves establishing a productive relationship between how people work, and the way that social business tools can help them. The stronger this relationship becomes, the greater the likelihood that social business tools will ‘go viral’ within the organisation.

Our research suggests several points of good practice for organisations which are trying to achieve this combination of a successful rollout and an enthusiastic subsequent uptake.

**Successfully rolling out social business tools**, the research found, underscored the perennial importance of training, balancing users’ needs to explore and experiment for themselves, while not letting them become so frustrated that they switch off or ‘work around’ the system.

The key, it found, was to expect problems but to be persistent in appropriately managing stakeholders through the process, and promptly responding to their concerns.

What didn’t work, on the other hand, was ‘evangelical enthusiasm’, which was seen as not being convincing. What was better, it appeared, was providing a clear view of the personal, team and organisational benefits that social business would bring, and then being able to communicate these in a nuanced fashion to different groups.

Adoption was also aided by a policy of giving people control over their own content. Rather than having it vetted by others, or edited so that it takes time to publish, the immediacy of publication—and control over content—creates an experience to which the user can easily become hooked.

For social business tools to ‘go viral’, organisations should foster the ‘triggers’ and conditions which will encourage a viral-like adoption. Options to think about include:

- Deliberately rolling-out first among the most dynamic groups, in order to create an appetite for use.
- Deliberately looking for ways to bridge the gaps between communities and clusters of like-minded people.
- Developing a broad group of ambassadors and advocates who are strongly connected in different parts of the organisation.
- Observing what is emerging, and adapting to the zeitgeist: it’s impossible to predict at the outset how usage will evolve, so go with the flow.

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To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Professor Jane McKenzie +44 (0)1491 571454 or Dr Christine van Winkelen +44 (0)1628 486849.

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