Lessons in enterprise social networking
from a Facebook Groups investigation

Read the reviews if you like, but the only way to judge Facebook as a prospective knowledge sharing tool for business is to jump in, experience the tool, adapt it to your own needs, and then decide for yourself.

By Jenny Ambrozek, William Anderson and Victoria Axelrod

When you think of Facebook, what first springs to mind? A kid's social media platform? Powerful way to connect with new people and ideas? Potential platform for opening new marketing channels? A rich new source of business intelligence? None of the above? All of the above? Something else entirely?

As conveners of the Facebook Groups in Business Investigation (FGIBI), Fall 2007 we also had questions about Facebook. Aware that new consumer technologies drive enterprise technology adoption, we went looking for answers.

This article shares learning from a volunteer network of 10 Facebook Group owners from four continents that tracked and shared activity data from December 2007 through February 2008. The insights and business observations are offered to help you (1) make good decisions about adding social networking capabilities to your enterprise knowledge sharing platforms and practices, and (2) to be alert to challenges and ensure successful adoption and use, when you choose to proceed.

'Serena Software Adopts Facebook as Corporate Intranet' grabbed headlines as our data gathering began in November 2007 and stories circulated of companies blocking employee access to Facebook. Kyle Arteaga's company, mashup server developer Serena, connects its 850 employees across 18 countries to support organisational change. He counsels, "This is a social movement enabled by technology, but it's a larger movement going on in today's society that you ignore at your peril."

The demonstration booths at Enterprise 2.0 in Boston in June 2008 showed enterprise social networking platforms proliferating. From IBM's Atlas for Lotus Connections to Trampoline Systems SONAR server, ConnectBeam, JIVE, Visiblepath, Insideview and Sharepoint's peer-to-peer platform, the race to dominate enterprise social networking is on.

Why the biz fuss? The power to connect
On 18 October 2007, FGIBI conveners (via two blog posts and Facebook messaging) issued an invitation to participate

in a study to address the questions "Do Facebook Groups support business development?" and "Do Facebook Groups create business value, or not?" By 3 December, volunteer owners of eight Facebook Groups from Australia, South Africa, Europe and North America, unknown to us, and one prior connection, accepted. A tenth joined after meeting one of us at a conference.

Data gathering confirmed Facebook's power to extend reach beyond traditional enterprise walls. Francois Gossieaux, owner of Marketing 2.0, FGIBI's largest group, advises, "Don't you think that out of 601 million people on Facebook there might be 200 that are interested in the topic that you want to talk about?"

The Bordeaux Colloquium's director, Kimberly Samaha, owner of the Sustainable Energy - Innovation & Technology Global Facebook Group, observed: "This has created … wonderful connections with advocates and new channels from blogs and other groups." Serena's Arteaga sees the value of Facebook as "the law of increasing returns. The more people who use it the more valuable it becomes, and more [people] get involved."

Value is created through interactions

"Extracting more value from interactions" is number four of McKinsey's eight business technology trends to watch for 2008. A growing proportion of the labor force in developed economies will primarily work using 'tacit interactions' (negotiations and conversations, knowledge, judgment, and ad hoc collaboration).

McKinsey argues as companies learn to use technologies promoting tacit interactions (wikis, virtual team environments, and videoconferencing) "they will develop managerial innovations – smarter and faster ways for individuals and teams to create value through interactions – difficult for their rivals to replicate."

Our FGIBI experience suggests McKinsey's 2009 trends list will include enterprise social networking platforms to further increase productivity from tacit interactions.

Work is social. Relationships drive business

Social networking platforms is the most cited Web 2.0 tool mentioned in the Aberdeen Group's June 2008 *Report on Workforce Collaboration and Web 2.0*. "Transfer of knowledge between and among workers" was reported as the top challenge for workforce collaboration tools by 59 per cent of the 270 companies interviewed. "Strategically, best-in-class companies are 69 per cent more likely to use Web 2.0 tools to ensure workers are connected to subject matter experts and mentors."

Lessons for successfully implementing SN Tools

Whether or not you have plans to add Facebook-inspired enterprise social networking platforms to your organisation's infrastructure, IBM or Microsoft clients can expect a sales

call promoting Atlas or Sharepoint. Our investigation participants represented a range of Facebook uses by smaller organisations. Here is their collected wisdom about what it takes to successfully use social networking tools when you decide to act.

1. Clear purpose is tied to business objective.
In his latest book, *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky states that successful online groups share three common characteristics: a reason for joining, tools that support participating and clear social practices. The FGIBI reinforces Shirky's claim. Each Facebook Group had a clear business focus – driving energy sustainability, expanding retail sales, exploring new approaches to marketing, building a community of practice, and evaluating a social network as a work practice. CScout Group owner Ray Cha concluded: "Having a reason for any business initiative is key to its success. That reason for being may change over time, as you learn more, but a reason is needed, nevertheless."

2. You have to work it. Active facilitation is essential and pays off.
Net Work author Patti Anklam analysed the social network dynamics and group interaction patterns among FGIBI participants. Survey questions were (1) who knew whom when the FGIBI began, and (2) who interacted with whom during the data collection period. The network maps (Figure 2) show that active facilitation leads to increased connections among all group members. Orange dots represent the study conveners; blue the Facebook Group owners.

Eric Edelstein, eSquared Facebook Group owner, is adamant: "We thought the group would become active by itself; now we see that admins are pushing the group; without active involvement from group owners many Facebook Groups are like a ghost town." Forrester analyst Oliver Young confirmed via e-mail: "Merely putting in a platform for social activity and hoping for the best is going to work just about as well as it always has: poorly."

3. Content is essential.
Online industry experience is that content drives participation. Branded content fuels frequently visited news sites, like the BBC and *New York Times*. Activity on online photography sharing site, Flickr, and bookmark sharing site Del.icio.us, is based on shared member generated content. A social network without a content focus is likely to founder.

FGIBI participants' content items were limited to what Facebook provided ('Discussion Topics', 'Posted Items', 'Posted Photographs', and 'Events') to drive participation. Despite tool deficiencies every group was active and grew a number of members.

Posting on the 'Discussion Wall' was the most common activity across all groups followed by submitting photographs.

Two groups carried out periodic online events, and one group ran a survey like a contest.

4. Events drive participation.
Both the Bordeaux Colloquium and the Marketing 2.0 groups successfully used events to increase visibility, membership and participation. Marketing 2.0 featured well-known Web 2.0 thought leaders, providing a group 'heartbeat', as owner Francois Gossieaux described. Online conversations can grow stale, with a few contributors promoting similar ideas. Establish a focus, provide content and tools to support conversation. Implement a schedule of events that introduce new content and engage new participants to move the discussions along.

The Bordeaux Colloquium's Samaha started with one Facebook group, Sustainable Energy, Innovation and Technology. This experiment led to creating other public groups on sustainable energy topics. One operated as an online trade show and successfully used Facebook event functionality to convene an on-line case study competition.

Over half the on-line members participated. Kimberly's results show Facebook-like platforms enable innovative ways of engaging people in topics that interest them. Cost-

Huddlemind Labs Facebook Group owner Dave Duarte explains, "Facebook Groups function as effective and free vendor relationship management software, putting our stakeholders in control of their information and communication preferences with organisations they'd like to engage." Systems vendors are providing solutions. Salesforce offers Faceforce, Worklight uses Facebook for supply chain vendor collaboration, and Ernst &Young and Towers Perrin use internal versions of Facebook for recruiting.

However, the specific tool is not the value determinant. What's important is enabling people in organisations to experiment, to find what works and what does not. One cost is adopting and adapting to usability and productivity issues with social tools that change frequently. Adopters must focus on the productivity gains from using Facebook like applications, figuring out the success metrics and understanding rates of adoption.

Our study revealed that large group size and rapid growth, by themselves, may not determine value. The dynamics of human networks are more complex. Each group had a different pattern of participation. You need to look beyond the face value of the numbers.

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effective online events are key venues for advancing business objectives. Hold events. Gather feedback. Document learnings. And repeat.

Remember that offline and online worlds are connected. Australian Network PR group owner Jenni Beattie found the most successful groups "have 'offline' events and then post photos and videos … of the event. The event [is] a catalyst for future discussion and keeps the group very active pre- and post-offline event."

5. Measure, monitor and act.
Studying 120 Facebook users Irwin Lazar, Nemeters Research, found that small tech savvy companies are early adopters of social networking sites like Facebook. However, using tools like Facebook presents both opportunities and fears. The fears are the usual ones: privacy, governance, legal and control. Organisations are accountable for actions taken in their name, so social networking practices must conform to governance, compliance and security policies. But letting users contribute their own content, form their own networks and freely share information creates internal and external business opportunities.

Today people want to use familiar consumer-based social tools in their businesses and companies are adapting.

6. Tools ecosystem expands.
It's our experience, reinforced by FGIBI, that new tools like social networking platforms must be considered in the context of a larger tools ecosystem – all the available technologies. Working with multiple tools – e-mail, blogs, a private wiki, public and private Facebook groups, and Google docs proved essential to communicate investigation progress and maintain participant engagement.

7. Evolve and adapt.
In her 2001 book *Evolve* Harvard Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter challenged us:
"In this world of connection, so many problems to solve, you've got to evolve."

To ensure FGIBI succeeded we not only needed to 'evolve' as circumstances changed but also adapt. Different tools were used at various stages of the data gathering and reporting out.

Evidenced by 80 million users; Facebook's evolution beyond a kid's social network platform to a potential source of business intelligence cannot be ignored. Trends in mashup technology allow Salesforce's Faceforce to integrate Facebook profiles with internal CRM information, improving sales person efficiency. Insideview links profiles and cross industry

company information for sales intelligence. Be alert to the challenges.

This is just the beginning.

Tools transience

Just as 2007 was Facebook's year, Twitter's rapid growth recorded in Alexa activity shows that the next generation of social networking micro-blogging tools is here.

Technologies and modes of communication are changing fast. During a study as short as the FGIBI more than one participating Facebook Group owner moved attention from his or her group to newly added Facebook Business Groups and Fanclubs. Within the 10-week data-gathering period group owners discovered promotions on Twitter added value for their business development.

Our group owners advise that while any particular platform may or may not prove useful, it's essential to participate, to learn how these tools work, to work them and be prepared to adapt as new tools emerge.

Meeting stakeholders where they are

FGIBI participants were an extraordinary group of busy people. As a voluntary research project getting attention to ensure

hidden talents, first job or weirdest experience) that they read and used in making contact. Non-work related connections seem to pay dividends in promoting the interpersonal trust important for knowledge transfer," according to Lisa Abrams.

Organisation leaders must acknowledge the explicit social nature of their own work culture. Organisations that can facilitate trusted relationships among their employees and their customers will be ahead in a business world where online and offline networks are a key to business success.

Conclusion

Regardless of what comes to mind when you think of Facebook, successful businesses will find out how social networking tools and practices can work for them. The FGIBI Facebook Group owners all found that their experience with Facebook was essential to their outcomes. In addition to creating visibility for their initiatives, they are each better equipped to make business use of whatever new online tools emerge. Facebook may not be the social network of choice for your enterprise, but one of the emerging enterprise social networking platforms will be.

The consensus of the 10 FGIBI participants is to jump in; get experience, make mistakes and learn by doing. "The value of these systems is bringing companies and customers closer

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regular activity gathering and insight collecting sometimes proved a challenge. We quickly learnt you have to meet people where they are, using whatever tool works best for them, communicating both to the group and individuals as needed.

Serena Software's Arteaga takes this notion a step further, advocating: "The future of intranets is increasingly distributed, sitting outside everybody's firewall. You need a presence on whatever platforms your employees and the people with whom they do business connect."

Openness and transparency: biggest change

The importance of building trust was a key learning for Hellenes Educators Facebook Group owner, Niki Lambropoulos, who counsels: "Initial social interactions are crucial to develop trust and creative flow." Open or collaborative systems hinge on member abilities to trust one another, share information, respect and value differences, adapt to the environment, learn, and follow through on commitments.

A recent Deloitte paper, 'The Elements of Value Network Alliance', indicates trust plays a central role in inter-firm networks built on social ties. FGIBI found the intersection of social and professional identities is essential to explore when considering networking and its potential for business.

But what people seemed to care about was "the personal information (e.g., person you'd most like to have lunch with, ideal vacation that you've never taken, hobbies or

together, with all kinds of benefits, and a far-reaching and long-term impact, on how business is done," asserts Matthew Lees, group analyst with Patricia Seybold Group.

Arteaga receives two to three calls a day from companies small and large seeking advice on how their organisations should use Facebook. He looks to the future by observing: "Work is social networking. It's easier to get in front of a movement, make mistakes and recover, than be late to the game."

Each of the FGIBI participants are in the forefront and have benefited. As can you. There's no time like the present to explore networking in the open. The future face of knowledge generation and sharing is in social networks. ∎

At time of writing, Facebook is at 80 million members.