



# IT'S TIME FOR COLLABORATION IN THE CENTER

Embrace the value of social knowledge sharing and crossfunctional collaboration.

By **Susan Hash**, Contact Center Pipeline



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**S**OCIAL NETWORKING is transforming the way employees learn, share and work. In a few short years, organizations have evolved from wanting to restrict employees' use of social media in the workplace to embracing its capabilities for connecting, communicating and knowledge sharing. In fact, according to Gartner, the number of organizations blocking access to all social media is dropping by about 10% a year. The research firm estimates that fewer than 30% of large organizations will block employee access to social media sites by 2014, compared with 50% in 2010.

Organizations are clearly seeing the value of software for collaboration and networking. Internally, contact centers can adapt social networking tools such as file sharing, blogs, forums, wikis, microblogging and instant messaging to provide agents with access to up-to-date information, internal resources and expertise. Yet it's important for business leaders to keep in mind that collaboration is really about people working with people. Making sure that your organization's business policies and practices are not impediments to collaboration can be a challenge.

Most organizations do not collaborate effectively across functions, says Randy Emelo, president and CEO of Triple Creek Software, which provides enterprise knowledge sharing software. "There is usually good collaboration within functions or business teams, but they're not connected, so information is self-sourced and self-referenced from a functional or team perspective."

Hierarchical organizational structures create a barrier to knowledge sharing, he adds. For instance, consider how internal budgeting practices often prevent employees from one business unit from directly accessing employees from another unit because those managers have to account for their staff's time. "Other systems, such as performance management, also tend to be functionally focused with employees viewed as segmented populations, rather than performing as a collaborative unit," Emelo explains, adding that: "Many organizations approach knowledge sharing as something that they need to constrain versus unleash."

### **Moving Toward a Boundaryless Organization**

In a typical organization, knowledge is scattered, existing in disparate systems (e.g., CRM systems, social web systems, content management systems, etc.) and in the heads of your employees and in their teams. Creating a collaborative environment is a cultural transformation for most organizations, says Adam Mertz, senior director of product marketing for Jive Software, a leading social business platform. "It is changing entirely the way that companies are working, and the way that people are connecting, sharing and learning," he says. "It's about leveraging tools and technology to help transform your culture so that people are sharing and you are collecting that knowledge."

But transforming a culture is not a one-time initiative. It's a journey—one that doesn't happen overnight. Rather, it starts with a vision, strategy and roadmap to reengineer the culture, Emelo says. This involves identifying where your largest knowledge constraints are, as well as the largest knowledge needs within your organization. "Consider where you have employees who are suffering from lack of productivity and who are moderately disengaged," he says. "Those are typically your biggest need areas."

A good place to begin to deploy collaboration tools is with the onboarding process, says Mertz. For instance, a traditional onboarding approach for contact centers involves a few weeks of instructor-led training to teach new-hires about the different systems, products, processes, policies and procedures. It's a one-way feed of information that is generally forgotten once new agents are out on the floor and taking their first calls. To develop a collaborative approach, "think beyond the instructor-led training," Mertz says. "Instead, make it easier for those new-hires to connect to the experienced service reps who have been there awhile. A social collaboration solution allows internal experts to blog about and share their knowledge, start discussions and give status updates so that knowledge is ultimately spread across the team." Features like



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**Randy Emelo** PRESIDENT AND CEO,  
TRIPLE CREEK SOFTWARE

Triple Creek's River enterprise software allows agents to create their own knowledge networks by engaging in and building learning connections. As Emelo explains: "Employees decide which topics they're interested in or those where they need more support, knowledge or information. Then they tap into the social resources (internal experts) that are available, and create their own connections and their own learning engagements (which has specific goals and objectives) based on their high-interest topics. They can also join topics that other people have created and have made publicly available."

For instance, if an agent wanted to learn more about how to handle difficult customers, he would join an engagement with other peer practitioners who are sharing their experiences about how they're handling difficult customers. Engagements may also include advisors who have more advanced experience and who are willing to point the agent toward additional resources. Advisors help to keep the conversations positive and productive.

A great bonus for contact centers is that social learning takes the pressure off managers and supervisors to be the chief developers of their staff, Emelo says. "Using social learning systems, people can develop themselves through their connections, and the manager can focus on managing their resources, projects, workflow and the performance of their people."

Emelo adds that providing employees with the opportunity to take charge of their own career development and giving them access to adequate feedback and knowledge resources to perform their duties increases employee engagement—in fact, Triple Creek clients typically see double-digit increases in employee engagement scores.

### **Internal Collaboration: ROI Can Be Substantial**

While staff learning and development capabilities associated with collaborative environments can greatly improve employee satisfaction and engagement, company executives will likely be more

trending topics also help new agents to see what the major issues and top discussions are so that they know where to direct their self-study time.

### **Social Learning Drives Engagement**

Ongoing employee development is a key component of a collaborative workplace. Social learning, in which employees learn from each other, can not only expand employees' knowledge, but improve engagement and job satisfaction, as well. The benefits to the organization are significant. "Social learning centers on information sharing, collaboration and co-creation," according to Tony Bingham, president and CEO of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), and author of *The New Social Learning*. "It helps people to become more informed, to gain a wider perspective, and to make better decisions by engaging with others."

How can you apply social learning in a contact center environment? A solution like



**Adam Mertz** SENIOR DIRECTOR OF PRODUCT MARKETING, JIVE SOFTWARE

interested in the productivity gains and cost savings. According to research by McKinsey & Co., the average knowledge worker wastes 28 hours per week collaborating, searching for information and using email. The report found that social technology provides a 20% to 25% improvement in productivity—in effect, giving workers a full additional workday of value per week.

These results were supported by an independent research study conducted by a top-three global business consultancy that looked at the impact of Jive's social platform, says Mertz. Companies reported a 15% increase in worker productivity and a 4% increase in topline revenue, according to the research. The productivity increases that led to the topline revenue growth were attributed to a 34% decrease in time spent looking for information, a 16% reduction in meetings, and a 21% reduction in email workload.

Cost savings and increased revenue can also be tied to collaboration around specific events, such as product launches.

The typical approach to launching products is to send an email to the contact center with product information that the agents need to read. That may be followed up with instructor-led training presented in person or over WebEx. "Instead, a product manager can write a blog post about the new product, and customer service agents can post their questions and feedback in real time," says Mertz.

He points to T-Mobile as an example. In the past, when launching a new phone, T-Mobile would give the phone to their service reps to test and then would try to gather their feedback. It was a time-consuming process. In a recent product launch, they used a Jive internal social platform, which they call T-Community, for reps to post questions and issues and share their thoughts. "They were able to collect much more feedback, more quickly, in such a way that they were able to quickly incorporate it and move up the release date, which increased revenue," he says. "They made modifications before rollout that saved millions of service calls."

### **External Collaboration Fosters Brand Loyalty**

Just as internal knowledge sharing provides the potential for long-term positive impact, external collaboration with customers has been shown to foster stronger relationships, increase revenue, cut support costs and enhance brand loyalty. Many organizations today engage their customers through online communities, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and online forums. By allowing customers to share their knowledge and support each other, contact center support staff can then focus on the more advanced issues.

While some customer communities are open to everyone, others have private areas where customers can create a support ticket or ask questions. To ensure that customers are connected with the appropriate resources to answer their questions or resolve their issue, Jive for Customer Service has a built-in case deflection workflow. As the customer types his question, the solution provides a spotlight search that highlights all of the conversations, questions and



**Sajeel Hussain** VP OF PRODUCT  
MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING, THRUPOINT

knowledge base content items that relate to the issue. The customer can click on these to read further and see whether his question has been answered. If not, he can continue searching or continue to create the support ticket. “By helping customers to find answers to their questions and issues faster, companies are saving costs and delighting customers,” says Mertz.

What types of savings are companies seeing? They can be fairly substantial for high-volume organizations. Take McAfee, for example. The antivirus software and computer security company has been leveraging Jive for several years—both inside the organization for their customer service reps, as well as externally to collaborate with customers. McAfee’s external customer support community has been highly successful at engaging its corporate customers: It averages 2.6 million unique visitors each year, and has 100,000 registered users, 58% of whom self-resolve issues within the community. The impact on the contact center? Call volume dropped by 26%, even

while the number of customers grew by about 5%. In addition, call handle time decreased by 3.1%, first-call resolution increased 17% and call escalations declined by 30%. Overall, the center’s call costs were reduced \$2.6 million per year.

### Collaboration Across Devices

In addition to collaborating internally and externally, the ability to communicate and share knowledge with customers across devices is key in today’s mobile business environment. And with an increasingly mobile workforce, internal experts need to be accessible to contact center agents wherever they are.

“Customers want collaboration experiences to be available on any device, anywhere,” says Sajeel Hussain, VP of product management and marketing for ThruPoint, a provider of WebRTC innovation to enable business applications with real-time communications capabilities—including voice, video, IM and presence—on mobile and desktop platforms.

While workforce mobility and the BYOD (bring your own device) movement are fast-growing trends, a major obstacle for organizations is developing applications that can run smoothly—and securely—across devices and operating systems. ThruPoint’s approach allows voice, video and messaging capabilities to be embedded within an organization’s existing application or web portal with policy and security, so that the collaboration experience is seamless to customers and employees.

How might a multi-device service experience work? Let’s say a customer is browsing on a financial services website, whether on a smartphone, tablet or desktop browser. The customer is interested in certain products, but has questions and wants to speak to someone. He can click a button to launch a video interaction with a contact center agent. The agent may need to pull in a specialist or product expert to answer the customer’s questions, so she uses enterprise social media software to locate the appropriate specialist. The product expert happens to be on the road, so he joins the video conference via his smartphone or tablet.



“Customer service reps, internal experts and customers can easily connect and have a video conference on existing applications, with all parties on different devices and without having to launch a WebEx session,” Hussain says. “It is a seamless collaboration. No clients needed; interworking with existing devices across all mobile platforms.”

### Driving Employee Adoption


Today, technology platforms and tools for enterprisewide collaboration are efficient and effective, but your people are the key to making it all work. While your employees may be fully utilizing social networks in their personal lives, changing the way that they approach their work, and getting them to share their knowledge—especially if your organization has functional boundaries—requires an effective user adoption strategy.

As mentioned earlier, using collaboration tools during the onboarding process is an effective way to ensure that new-hires are sharing and connecting from Day 1. But what about your existing employee base? If your organization is going through the necessary culture shift to break down barriers, you will need to incorporate a change management initiative that both educates and promotes the benefits of the tools.

The majority of service staff want to provide a great experience for their customers. Understanding how the tools that they're using to stay connected in their personal lives will help them to be more effective in their jobs is an important selling point, says Jive's Mertz. “People have fundamentally changed the way that they connect, share and learn outside of work. If you can draw that correlation to how we're changing the way that we are connecting, sharing and learning while you're at work—that it's similar to how you live your life outside of work and it's going to be better, easier and more fun for you—a lot of people are receptive to that message, more so than three or four years ago when social networking was new.”

In addition to the communication component, Mertz recommends applying gamification concepts to help drive engagement—whether it's for an external customer support community or you want to encourage your support reps to start leveraging it. For instance, for new-hires, you can create “missions” that they have to perform, such as comment on a discussion, create a question or read a knowledge base article. Once they've performed all of the missions, they receive a badge. “Giving them fun ways to engage works remarkably well,” he says. “It's amazing what people will do for badges or credit.”

Many employees will see the opportunity to learn and develop as an incentive, adds Emelo. This also provides contact centers with a way to meet their staff's most critical needs, which will help to retain experienced agents.

“The social contract between employer and employee has changed,” Emelo states. “Employees will stay with the organization as long as the organization allows them to develop their marketable skills. Learning and collaboration is critical in this era of free-agent workforces. Although it typically flies in the face of current organizational practice, where we try to manage and limit who people are contacting or who they're sharing with, the exact opposite is what is needed to engender loyalty. You will retain your top agents as long as you allow them to pursue some of their own interests while they're accomplishing and performing the current roles and responsibilities that the organization has given them.” 

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