IBF Blog: Building the Social Media Ecology

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Building the Social Media Ecology – Part One

Five years since MIT's Andrew McAfee coined the term, "Enterprise 2.0,"[i] for enterprise social media, skeptical senior executives are still struggling with how to realize social media's vaunted benefits – innovation, knowledge-discovery, strengthened ties, and efficient online problem-solving, to name a few. At a presentation last week I asked the 50 participants to name obstacles to social media's success. They responded with "fragmentation," "posturing," and "too much volume." Most admitted that they were social media enthusiasts and, in many cases, leading social media initiatives at their organizations. They seemed to voice IBF members' concerns that I've heard over the last year, who find social media's actionable knowledge-creation and reuse to be elusive.

These benefits are less elusive than they seem. They do require time, attention, and even some risk-taking - the same types of leadership investment that any real-time, or team-based collaborations require:

1. Being intentional about the ecology of collaboration - on and off-line;

2. Being intentional about social media topics and participants; and

3. Supporting action by helping to build coherence from social media content.

You can't have trust online if you don't have trust offline

In sharing knowledge in social media, one of two things must be true for the contributor: interpersonal trust and individual safety.

Interpersonal trust comes from a sense that you who are asking for my help (or from whom I am asking for help) are worthy of that engagement. Worthiness might come from relationships I've developed with you or your team, or from an affiliation we share (part of the same company or network). I will go out into a public forum, a SharePoint Discussion or Yammer thread, and try to help you. Interpersonal trust doesn't mean we're best of friends. Richard Hackmann, renowned Harvard University team researcher, found that for teams and musicians, a small amount of friction generally results in a better quality product or performance.[ii] You might say, where there is trust, interpersonal trust trumps like-mindedness. We see this kind of trust within the IBF network, which operates both on and offline,

where confidentiality enables participants to share valuable knowledge across the boundaries of organizations. For example, an [online member community on Yammer](#) provides a space where members can ask and answer questions in confidence.*Individual safety* comes from the sense that sharing will not rob me of something I value, such as credibility, recognition, or respect. If the organization rewards me explicitly for inventing my own solutions, I'll close myself to input from others. If the organization rewards me explicitly for being the "subject matter expert," I'll hold knowledge close to the chest until I know I'll "get the credit." These hold-back behaviors come from outside the social media world, and spill over into that world, in the form of absent experts, opaque comments, and grandstanding. Again, using the example of the IBF member community, those who share knowledge within this network are acknowledged by their peers as leaders in the intranet and digital workplace field.

Andrew McAfee writes in his seminal 2009 book on corporate social media, *Enterprise 2.0*, "[E]nteprise 2.0 is about abandoning the assumption that unilateral control is the best way to achieve desired outcomes, and instead trusting in people's ability to interact productively without constant supervision from above." [iii] McAfee goes on to suppose that trust is the result of intentional behavior on the part of social media leaders. Social media leaders' behaviors (and those of the corporate structure in which they reside) shape acts of trust we see online. Only when leaders encourage inquiry (versus defensiveness), welcome diversity (versus group-think), and invite respect (versus judgment) are the same possible online. When corporate values promote interpersonal trust across the firm, and incentives for knowledge-exchange help to provide individual safety across the firm, then people will trust social media in the digital workplace.

In Part Two, we will look at the importance of intentional activity (such as seeding content or synthesizing knowledge) for building the social media ecology, with an example from Oxfam America.

Building the Social Media Ecology – Part Two

In Part One, we looked at the importance of trust in building the social media ecology. In this post we build on this to explore the importance of intentional activity (such as seeding content or synthesizing knowledge) for building the social media ecology, with an example from Oxfam America.

Sow and Yee Shall Reap

I recently had the opportunity to discuss with an IBF colleague, Ephraim Freed, an effective social media initiative he participated in at Oxfam America (a 450 person global development organization in eight countries). The organization had recently introduced a process called Annual Impact Review (AIR) for each of the program officers. The leadership's goal was to use AIR to see patterns, define areas for improvement, and increase transparency. Ephraim and the knowledge team decided to use the social media discussion tool, ThoughtFarmer, as a vehicle for fleshing out the AIR recommendations. The knowledge team was very intentional. They chose a specific topic-agenda, so that eyes and ideas would be focused there. Moreover, they invited, cajoled, prodded, and coached credible program team members to be conveners of the discussion. Thanks to the knowledge team's intervention (and

occasional cheerleading online), employees were online discussing what mattered, and in a proactive way.

This intentional activity – seeding content, inviting others to seed, and gently nurturing it – is essential for leading social media programs. It's facilitation, not manipulation. It's inviting people to use social tools in their own self-interest, and in the interest of the learning organization. It's also nurturing the trust we discussed earlier, encouraging the topics and inviting people to be curious. As with trust, topics must matter in the non-social world first. They contribute to strategic goals like growth, market share, relationship-strength, and productivity.

Keep an Action Agenda

I wince every time I open up Twitter or Yammer. I feel like Dorothy realizing that everything is edible in Oz, but hardly having time to taste. I see streams of ideas coming across the transept, and know I am overlooking great wisdom as I skim. I wish I could see a digest, in simple prose, not crazy acronyms. I wish there were arrows pointing me to the most relevant links, so that I could spend a productive ten minutes and then dig in. I'm not alone. Despite the huge uptake for social media in the fortune 500,[iv] managers cite lack of meaningful synthesis as a major draw-back.

So, with both trust and topics, the leadership effort is about engaging action. What that means, is helping participants see patterns across time, across voices, or across threads. At times it may mean forcing the question, "So, how would you summarize this?" Or, "So, what is all this leading to?" At other times, it means pointing out possible connections or even contradictions, "We've been talking about report findings from three different teams, and, even though they differ in their estimates, I wonder if anyone else is seeing that they all point to the need for consumer involvement?" This type of synthesizing needs to be done with some humility (you may be too bold or strike too soon). And, you need agreement a priori from the participants that there is an expectation of action. Again, what goes on outside of social media echoes in social media: Good governance and decision-making in other parts of the business spill-over into the Yammerings, Tweets, and Connections. For example, in an online community in which I participate, the onus is on members who initiate a question to collate responses and integrate this knowledge into a summary back to the group. This is partly about the sharing policy of the community, but it also reflects the trust operating between its members offline and online.

Getting the right people out there on our social platforms - sharing and crafting ideas on the topics that matter to your organization's performance - requires active social media leadership. As social media leaders we must build trust on and offline, plan how social media participants spend their time, and help as users convert threads into actionable ideas. Social media leadership is not one person or department, but a collaboration inviting all levels of the organization. Start today by doing your own benchmark: How strong is your on- and offline trust? Who (and what ideas) show up in your social forums? Can you point to actions informed by online discussions? Do you get kudos for social threads' coherence?Now, enlist executive management and social media mavens. This may be one of your most revealing and motivating benchmarks ever.

Katrina Pugh's Bio

Katrina Pugh is a lead benchmarker with IBF. She is author of Sharing Hidden Know-How (Jossey-Bass, Wiley, 2011), and is president of AlignConsulting, a firm that helps organizations plan business and technology change by channeling insight into action. She formerly was VP of Knowledge Management for Fidelity, Senior Technical Program manager for Intel Solution Services, and held leadership roles at JPMorganChase and PwC Consulting/IBM. Kate is on the Advisory Board of Knowledge Management Institute of Canada, and is a lecturer at Columbia University's Information and Knowledge Strategy Masters' program. Connect with Katrina Pugh on Twitter and LinkedIn.

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[i] McAfee, "Enterprise 2.0: The Dawn of Emergent Collaboration," *Sloan Management Review*, vol 47, No 3. Spring, 2006.

[ii] "Why Teams Don't Work," An Interview with Richard Hackman, *Harvard Business Review*, May, 2009. Reprint RO905H.

[iii] *Enterprise 2.0*, by Andrew McAfee, p. 207, Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.

[iv] "The rise of the networked enterprise: Web 2.0 finds its payday," McKinsey Quarterly, December, 2010.