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Effective enterprise collaboration strategy needs everyone on the bus

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by:
Pamela DeLoatch

Ensuring that all levels of an organization understand the benefits of enterprise collaboration is a must for getting optimum value from user buy-in.

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Senior managers might be convinced that rolling out a new technology initiative is a good idea, but if affected employees aren't sold on it, your big plans will never take off. And user buy-in is particularly essential when you're implementing an enterprise collaboration strategy, since its success depends on the regular use of collaboration tools by employees throughout the organization.

Analysts who focus on collaboration and social networking say that project managers in charge of deploying an enterprise collaboration system should take a number of steps before launching any technology. The key is to make sure employees fully embrace the new collaboration strategy and the technology platform behind it. Analysts say that by carefully preparing for a deployment in this way, you'll be better positioned to confirm that all levels of the enterprise understand the importance, expected benefits, and business outcomes of the collaboration system; doing so, in turn, can help ensure that the organization derives optimum benefit from its investment.

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One of the first steps is to determine whether your company is ready for collaboration. Does the corporate culture already encourage information sharing and working across teams and departments, or are business units silos in which people tend to work individually and secretively? This question should be answered at the beginning of any collaboration project to reveal where an organization currently resides on the collaborative spectrum.

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"If you have a culture where people are rewarded for hoarding information and being experts without sharing, you're not ready," said Carol Rozwell, an analyst at Gartner Inc. in Stamford, Conn. Technology will not make an organization collaborative if it does not already support the notion of teams from different business units working in concert on common projects, Rozwell added.

Even if the corporate culture does encourage teamwork between different departments, it's still important to enlist senior managers to help drive the use of an enterprise collaboration system and to make sure that the organization is ready for a rollout, said T.J. Keitt, a senior analyst for

Forrester Research Inc. in Cambridge, Mass. "Executives set the course for the ship. They must articulate and demonstrate the use," he said.

Decide how your organization will use collaboration and enterprise social networking tools. Rather than jumping on the bandwagon and incorporating an enterprise collaboration or social networking platform into business processes just because other companies are doing so, examine how the use of such technologies will benefit your business.

Companies sometimes use the "provide and pray" method to roll out a collaboration system, Rozwell said. But that is often unsuccessful because the organization has not established specific business purposes for the collaboration program, and business users are not able to see the expected benefits. Eventually, interest from all sides could wane if there is no clear idea of why the system should be used.

First, establish your organization's business objectives, then find the type of system that will support those goals, Keitt said. For example, an organization that is interested in simply establishing internal blogs for employees would likely consider different products than, say, a company that wants to enable customers to communicate with employees.

Teach your employees how to use a collaboration system effectively. Once your organization has established clear business reasons for an enterprise collaboration strategy and is ready to deploy a system, it is essential to get employees invested in learning about the technology and how best to use it. Human resources, IT and especially departmental managers need to show workers the value of using the collaboration tools, Keitt said.

To help get buy-in from employees, demonstrate how using the technology will benefit them in their daily work, Rozwell advised. Once people see -- in clear and individually tailored ways -- that collaboration tools can save steps, time and effort, they'll understand why they should adopt the new technology and workflow processes, she said.

An implementation can be especially effective when business managers point out specific ways that their teams can use collaboration and enterprise social networking technology, Rozwell said. What's more, she added, if managers begin to put essential information only on the new system, employees soon learn that they must use it to remain informed.

Take the right measurements. As with every new IT initiative, most organizations want proof that a collaboration program is working. But trying to measure the gains from collaboration and enterprise social networking is difficult.

"The focus has been on measuring adoption and usage," said Charlene Li, founder of San Mateo, Calif.-based IT research firm Altimeter Group. But instead of counting status updates, it's more meaningful to study the new relationships and forms of employee-to-employee communication that result from the use of the technology, she said.

Ideally, that interaction encourages information sharing, knowledge capture and collective action, and empowers employees in ways that the technology alone cannot accomplish. That's why, Li said, organizations should look at the relationships and communication processes that need improving when considering and planning an enterprise collaboration implementation. Then, instead of measuring the number of conversations or other engagement metrics -- as is commonly done -- companies should track the relationships that form and whether gaps in communication narrow as a result of using a collaboration system; they should do this with the aim of helping achieve business goals, she said.

Keep participation moving forward. Even if employees see the benefits of a collaboration system, it is all too easy to slip back into old habits. Continue to offer incentives for using the system and make improvements to collaboration processes, Li said. Business users will begin to see positive changes as collaboration becomes embedded in the organizational workflow and their work becomes more streamlined, she added.

Eventually, Li said, using the collaboration system will become the norm as it continues to be enhanced, encouraging users to more readily adopt the technology and new processes, with the ultimate goal of improving business efficiency and performance.

Pamela DeLoatch is a freelance writer in the B2B and technology environments. She has written articles, profiles and case studies for numerous organizations.

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