Chapter 8.1
Social Software Trends in Business:
Introduction

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ABSTRACT

Social networking and Web 2.0 are the hottest words in technology right now; but is there more than just hype? This chapter will define and describe social software and Web 2.0, separate their true concepts from the marketing and buzz, and follow by identifying what might be next for this dynamic technology space. After establishing the social software and Web 2.0 concepts, this chapter identifies the value that they can bring to a company when used in a business context and the shortcomings or pitfalls. This chapter will set the foundation for subsequent discussions of social software and Web 2.0 for specific industry applications.

INTRODUCTION

Social software is the hottest topic in the technology space right now. It is nearly impossible to avoid hearing about Web 2.0 and social networking in mainstream media publications and broadcast news—and it is not just technology magazines or TV shows either. For example, just about every recent issue of *Time* magazine has had an article on Web 2.0, social networking, or something related to those buzzwords.

It is not just the mainstream media that are picking up on this hot topic. The technology itself is being used to tout both its unmatched potential and its less-often-mentioned shortcomings. Web 2.0 is providing the ability for evangelists and skeptics across the globe to weigh in and have equal voice on the very platform they are using to deliver their opinions and thoughts. For those not in the know, this seems like an opportunity that can only be missed at one's own peril.

Every new Web site is clamoring to be known as a Web 2.0 or social networking site and be the next big buzz. Gone are the days when it was good enough to provide a store front on the Internet and generate millions of dollars in sales. These days, you have to have the ability to connect people, provide consumer ratings systems, and allow ev-

erything to be tagged and commented on. Users have become more fickle and will quickly move on to another Web site that enlists more Web 2.0 feel and functionality. Casual Internet users have evolved and do not want to just browse for information; they want to project themselves, get connected to others, and interact or collaborate.

Likewise, traditional corporations are clamoring to put Web 2.0 and social software to work for their own benefit as well. Many managers and executives have said that they need to implement Web 2.0 and social software to have a competitive advantage and not be left behind by the competition. However, many will also admit that they are not quite sure what Web 2.0 really is or what social software really does for their business.

As a result of all this recent press and the amazing amount of hype surrounding Web 2.0 and social software, there are many who believe that these are new concepts (which they use interchangeably), have only recently come to fruition, and have been made available in the last few years. However, like most things, the application of social networking in software is just a new application of a concept that has existed for quite some time. Web 2.0 has been more of a gradual evolution than the instantaneous explosion that the hype would have one believe.

To help one understand where the social software market trend is going, it is extremely important to remove the hype and understand its underlying concepts and history. Only after understanding the foundation concepts of social software can one truly define its value in the marketplace and what social software means to a corporation. The remainder of this chapter will answer the question "What is social software?" and discuss its value to businesses. Subsequent chapters will proceed to examine the relevance of social software and its value as applied in the context of specific business and educational applications.

BACKGROUND

One of the most common issues that leads to confusion in this space and obfuscates the ability to see the value in social software is the interchangeable usage of terms. Just about everyone who talks and writes about this technology space freely and openly substitutes terms such as *Web 2.0*, *social networking*, and *collaboration* as though they all mean the same thing. This only serves to make this market space appear more nebulous than it needs to be and confuses those who are not already knowledgeable on the topic.

Perhaps all of this confusion should be an indicator that there is more marketing hype than substance in the social software trend. However, there are also examples and data to substantiate the validity of the use of social software for the benefit of business. The reality of the situation is that it is quite a bit of both. While there is true business value to be derived from social software, it takes the ability to see through the "buzzword bingo" that regularly occurs.

This is not to say that all terms have been clearly defined to date either. There are many experts in this space who still cannot seem to reach agreement on what certain terms, such as *Web 2.0*, really mean. Therefore, it is important to establish some definitions in order to build our social software foundation of understanding and to see the business benefits of social software.

Social Networking

Contrary to recent technology hype, social networking is a sociology concept that has evolved from sociology studies in the late 1800s and continues to mature even today. While the first studies of social networks may not have been deemed as such, the coining of the term *social network* and the analysis thereof became more mainstream and evolved rapidly within the sociology field in the 1950s to 1970s.

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