Social Software: A New Generation of Tools

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BY CLAY SHIRKY

At Release 1.0, *we've been writing about social software for decades, albeit under a variety of names. It comes in lots of guises, but the underlying principle has been that software should somehow strengthen and enhance human connections rather than impede them. That could not happen broadly until now, with the achievement of three necessary preconditions: First, people feel comfortable enough with technology to focus on the people at the other end rather than on the technology. Second, enough technology is now "standards-based" to enable new capabilities like social software to be adopted within (rather than apart from) a user's existing environment of software and data. And third, at least in the US business context, almost everyone a user could want to interact with is also on the Web - a fact that both produces the critical mass of users needed for social software to deliver and contributes to the ubiquity of standards.*

Clay Shirky, as a longtime user and observer of the use of social software, excels in going beyond the above analysis of the necessary conditions for social software, to identify and promote what could be sufficient features to lead to its broad and productive adoption. These features are based on a better understanding of how people actually work in groups - or perhaps a modulation of the unrealistic expectations we had in the past. There was never quite the bubble for e-sociality as for e-commerce, but both fields have learned a lot by experimentation. (Fortunately, the education was not quite as expensive in the field of social software, which tends to attract social rather than commercial characters!)

In the issue below, Shirky outlines what he has learned, eloquently and lucidly explaining the tools and their uses. With appropriate discre-

edventure

The conversation starts here.

Traction: Weblogs grow up

Traction Software, a startup in Providence, RI (near the Brown University campus, where many of its founders studied), wants to bring the weblog revolution to the enterprise. Weblogs hold some obvious attractions for a business setting. Traction (the name of both the company and the tool) organizes information by group and time, makes material widely available, and invites employees to share information. As Greg Lloyd, Traction's founder and CEO, puts it, "We want to make it easy for individuals to create or comment on content in both public and private spaces. We also want to let them see the union of all conversations and activity in those spaces, organized by project, importance and time." These features hold the largest potential for weblogs to transform business environments, because they function as what Cory Doctorow calls his "outboard brain," providing a way for groups to pool individual knowledge. (Doctorow, Outreach Coordinator at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, also runs the influential weblog BoingBoing.net.) Lloyd sees this aggregation of dispersed intelligence as a core part of Traction's value: "By championing the personal voices within an organization, and by helping users cite each other's writing, we can help create streams of thought and opinion that can be aggregated from the bottom up."

Traction attempts to utilize the simplicity and ease of use of blogging software to publish and annotate content, while allowing better control of security and access than standard blogging tools. The tool lets employees report their efforts and observations in a weblog. Other interested parties (and, in the case of sensitive material, only those parties) can then have access to that material in one place and on-demand, rather than piecing things together from a dozen Cc:ed e-mails.

The front page of a Traction blog is the same as any weblog: recent posts of relevant material, listed by group, in reverse chronological order. These posts can be links to external material ("Check out this interesting *Forbes* article on one of our clients"), internal material ("Here's our current marketing deck. Comments?") or pure commentary ("I posted my thoughts on our current product mix").Traction allows the creation of a far more complex mix of posts than the average weblog tool, however, by cross-referencing posts by groups and user-defined labels. Every user of the system is a member of one or more groups: A user could be a member of the Sales group, the Directors' group, and the Chicago office group. Both individuals and groups have a set of permissions relative to other individuals and groups. Someone in the Sales group might be able to post in the Sales weblog, to append comments or questions to existing posts in the Product group's weblog, and to read the CFO's weblog, but might not have permission even to read the Board group's weblog.

(Users can ask to be notified of updates by e-mail so they don't have to be in constant scanning mode.)

Traction also provides a much richer set of annotation features than most weblogs. Each item posted to a Traction blog can be flagged with any number of user-created categories, such as Urgent, or relevant to a particular group, such as Executives. (And, true to form, Traction allows you to set who can create new markup categories for which sorts of posts.) In addition, posts can be saved, copied, or forwarded by e-mail with or without accompanying annotations, allowing a user to send around a copy of potential sales material while hiding the VP's scathing commentary. And, as icing on the cake, all the various markup, annotation and other manipulations treat the paragraph as the logical unit of the system, allowing for granular commentary where needed.

> **TRACTION SOFTWARE INFO**
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> Headquarters: Providence, RI
> Founded: November 1996
> Employees: 9
> Funding: $1.7 million from In-Q-Tel,
>   Slater Center for Interactive
>   Technologies and individuals
> Key Metric: 25 enterprise and govern-
>   ment customers
> URL: http://www.tractionsoftware.com

Lloyd says, "Everyone asks how we can manage a mix of material sorted by importance, area of focus and time, as if this is an unsolvable problem. But newspapers solve it every day, by accepting that there is no one answer, and by making up a new front page every day. In groups, coherence comes from shared labels: We all agree how something should be characterized, so the solution doesn't need to be perfect to be useful. Given the volume of material in the average newspaper, which readers are perfectly capable of navigating through, we think this is a solvable problem."

One big challenge for an enterprise weblog is getting users to use it: Most public weblogs languish after a few posts (much as most personal diaries peter out after a few entries). Paul Perry, an IT director at Verizon, a Traction client, says that getting employees to use it has been relatively simple: "People see that if they want influence in the company, all they have to do is post." The trick will be not so much weaning employees off e-mail (an impossibility, for good reason), but rather convincing them to use e-mail to notify them of new content on the weblog.

Traction overcomes the risk that if employees feel they are being forced to say everything out in the open, they may say nothing at all (or they'll restrict their comments to the "Ooooh, Ms. CEO, you are so smart! Can I please have a raise?" variety). Traction's answer to this problem is to allow groups some freedom in creating Traction spaces: "Each project space has its own team and its own audience. Project spaces can be opened up to a wider group of peers or senior management, or kept private, as the project group wants." Lloyd uses Traction's own customer relations

operations as an example: "We create one project area for each customer, visible only to that customer and us, as well as one group project for all the customers. When we have a new announcement – an updated SDK, say – we post it to the group project and everyone sees it. But if one of those customers wants to talk to us about helping them implement it, that conversation happens in our separate shared project, away from the other customers."

Traction avoids the trap of the monolithic app by providing a variety of skins to ensure that it can interoperate with legacy applications. Although a "skin" usually refers to a particular look and feel for an application, Traction's skins can include behaviors (for example, the concept of a specific fiscal year reflected in the way quarters are selected and summed) as well as pointers to other applications. Verizon has a skin that imports many other Verizon-specific intranet functions, such as search and access to the employee database.

As with almost all social software, Traction faces hard choices between user enthusiasm and purchaser buy-in. The simplest way for an application to spread is to be freely available (c.f. ICQ and Napster). The simplest way to keep an application from spreading is to make it cost too much, in either money or time. Traction is trying to split the difference by using the asymmetry of the publishing pattern: few writers, many readers. If you want to follow the conversations hosted on Traction, there's no charge, but if you want to participate with your own comments, there's a fee. Traction is sold as enterprise software, either run as an ASP or hosted in-house, with the usual installation and per-seat charges for the number of users who can create, import or annotate content. This split between reader and user makes it simple and cost-free for a firm to expose Traction pages to the world (or even just to another organization) as a way of sharing collective intelligence.

Socialtext: Wiki, meet weblog
Socialtext was founded with the goal of helping organizations take advantage of "simple tools that people [would] actually use," says Ross Mayfield, co-founder and CEO. (DISCLOSURE: CLAY SHIRKY IS ON THE ADVISORY BOARD OF SOCIALTEXT.) Taking a cue from users' rejection of most groupware solutions, Socialtext is creating tools for collaboration in the enterprise by identifying what software works today and combining and improving upon those solutions rather than re-inventing them. The technology at the core of Socialtext's offering is a wiki. The company also uses the expression "collaborative workspace" to refer to its software. (What's lost in poetry is gained in clarity.) The developers of Socialtext started by identifying useful features