

Reprinted from *Future of Work Agenda*  
November, 2008

## Notes from the Field: Social Networking Comes of Age

By Jim Ware and Charlie Grantham

Over the past couple of months we've become convinced that social networking is real – and that it's having a serious impact on the world of work.

Now some of you may read that statement and say “Duh! Where have these guys been?” But it really has been only recently that we've seen genuine interest in, and use of, social networking software among our clients and corporate friends. Every conference we attend seems to end with a hands-on training session with some genius (usually much younger than we are) holding forth in the lounge demonstrating Twitter, Facebook, and the like.

Sure, there have been blogs and bulletin boards for years, and many of us have been using sites like Google Groups and Yahoo Groups in our personal lives for years, to connect and communicate with family members, friends, and fellow members of special interest groups. And we've all known about Facebook and MySpace for some time – but thought of them primarily as something teenagers and college kids had embraced. We wondered what was going on but didn't really think all that much about it and certainly didn't see any real business value.

Now, however, we've been struck by the many ways that these kinds of sites – and the whole idea of connecting large numbers of widely dispersed folks directly with each other – has penetrated the corporate world. We're seeing employee portals and corporate intranet sites that look a whole lot like Facebook. We're also seeing corporate blogs that are focused entirely on internal employees and project teams.

In all candor, the boundaries between “traditional” collaborative software (like email, instant messaging, and bulletin boards) and the new social networking applications have gotten awfully fuzzy in our minds.

We recently had an opportunity to listen to **Michael Rudnick** of [Watson Wyatt](#) talk about how intranets, employee portals, and social networks inside companies are changing the very nature of the conversations that employees have with each other, and with their employers. We're now convinced that Web 2.0 is driving significant organizational change – in all kinds of ways that no one – least of all, us – fully understands at this point (Michael has published a technical white paper about this topic titled “[How the Google Effect is Transforming Employee Communications and Driving Employee Engagement](#)”).

We're also reminded of a marvelous – and now classic – *Harvard Business Review* article by Alan Webber called “What's So New about the New Economy?” (HBR, January-February 1993, reprint #93109). There Webber argued that the “new economy” (whose shape was only dimly visible 15 years ago) was going to be all about conversations – the creation and exchange of ideas. He suggested that the most effective way to understand how work gets done in any organization is to map the flow of conversations among its knowledge workers.

Today, of course, that mapping is almost a free by-product of the fact that so many of those conversations take place in the digital world of email, instant messaging, and social networking tools.

Our point here is really a simple one: social networking tools enable, facilitate, and document the millions of conversations that occur every day in the corporate world. Like any other tool, social networking applications can both help and hinder the creation of knowledge and, ultimately, value. But until we understand which tools do what, and how people use them, we're not going to make good use of them.

We need to know which tools people use, how they use them, and why. Only then can we begin to make informed choices about whether and how to deploy them in our organizations.

To that end, we've put together a simple set of questions about social networking tools that we hope you'll respond to. Our six questions are in an online survey that we invite you to complete:

[http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=pkopp3GCNhBMnHVv82cBdA\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=pkopp3GCNhBMnHVv82cBdA_3d_3d)

It should take you less than five minutes to complete the survey. We'll publish the results next month along with our perspectives on this new phenomenon. And – as an incentive, we'll send a copy of our book *Corporate Agility* to two of you – chosen at random from all the responses we get before November 26.

Please also [send your comments directly to us](#), or post a comment on the blog version of this article. We look forward to learning from you.

### **About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda***

*Future of Work* is a global network of resources – practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and senior consultants – who are committed to building and implementing physical, social, and technology-based work environments that are cost-effective, socially and environmentally responsible, and personally satisfying.

We are focused on defining the future of work and helping our members and clients achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. *Future of Work* produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. The Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community.

*Future of Work Agenda* is a free monthly electronic newsletter produced by the *Work Design Collaborative*. To sign up for a subscription to *Future of Work Agenda*, please go to:

[http://www.thefutureofwork.net/news\\_newsletter\\_register.html](http://www.thefutureofwork.net/news_newsletter_register.html).

Direct inquiries to either Charles Grantham at [charlie@thefutureofwork.net](mailto:charlie@thefutureofwork.net), or James Ware at [jim@thefutureofwork.net](mailto:jim@thefutureofwork.net).