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Developing a Web Culture

ooking back at the 1990s, we're likely to recognize it as the decade when the Internet changed everything and the idea of a Web culture surfaced. However, not all organizations noticed or adapted to the new options and possibilities created by diminished technological barriers. Perhaps the capacity to adapt is more about establishing a culture that can see the possibilities rather than simply the willingness to rip out an existing technical infrastructure.

What does working within a Web culture mean? Is this similar to, or an extension of, an existing organizational culture? What defines or supports a particular culture? An organizational culture exists when employees share a similar set of beliefs, values, knowledge, attitudes, norms, behaviors, and habits. Whether a culture shapes negative or positive outcomes depends on how these attributes are adopted and applied, even how they interact with the environment.

What organizational mind-set and critical capabilities are shared by organizations that derive optimal results from the Web? Although corporate culture continues to be a well-studied concept, applying that idea to a Web culture is fairly new, given the limited maturity of the technology. However, like any culture, a Web culture is comprised of many of the same characteristics that make any culture successful or not. Understanding how to develop and support an active Web culture within your organization is important because it will directly determine how Internet technologies are adopted and used within the organization. It can also determine the resources provided to deploy these technologies.

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WEB CULTURE DEFINED

Each quarter I participate in a healthcare industry benchmarking survey that solicits input regarding the Web culture within each respondent's organization. Questions attempt to measure the level of organizational participation directed toward Web development activities. Although I've always felt my organization is far ahead of the curve when it comes to adoption and use of Internet technologies, some of this culture appears to be a byproduct of being part of a large academic environment. There are only a few organizational layers between the University president and the newest teaching assistant. This relatively flat structure, coupled with an academic heritage of independent thought, lends itself to technological innovation and organic adaptation of technologies useful to a wide variety of disciplines.

In my university environment, the culture supporting Internet technologies has evolved steadily with profound grass-roots support, especially for technology made more accessible because of our open source tradition. Some of this support followed naturally, just as it would with any hot, overly publicized technology. However, support that ultimately translated into resources ("putting your money where your mouth is") was the result of several key steps: informal experimentation, funded pilots, mainstream infrastructure projects, and consolidation efforts aimed at convergence to organizational standards. In most organizations, pioneering individuals with strong integrative thinking skills experiment with a new

technology by applying it to problems and situations in their areas of expertise. Organizations that foster independent thinking and some degree of flexibility achieve more "at bats" or "shots on goal."

Adaptive cultures depend on individuals for initial experimentation, but actual mainstreaming of their approaches is highly dependent on the nature of the organization itself and employs a three part framework. At its highest level, this framework is comprised of strategy, oversight/governance, and standards. All are necessary in order to create and support a successful Web culture.

STRATEGY

Strategy aligns ideas, priorities, and resources with a high-level statement of intent. It galvanizes people to action. Although Internet and Web-based technologies get lots of hype, they are only power tools, or enablers, for specific business results. Driving forward on sharply defined goals with clarity and leadership can spark fantastic potential insights and opportunities when the right culture is in place. A Web culture based on information sharing and holistic and integrative thinking allows the magic to happen.

Aligning Business Plans, Strategies, and Stakeholders

Web initiatives can go miserably off course if they do not ultimately tie back to the organization's mission and its business plan. This is true of any technology not clearly aligned with measurable business goals. To achieve alignment, many organizations create an additional Internet or Web site strategy and business plan. The Web strategy is meant to support the organization's business plan and acts as an enablement piece that reflects existing business objectives. The point is *not* that drilling down through conceptual levels of strategy produces the single definitive answer and the business problem is solved, full stop. Rather, the continual, grueling process of re-stating and refining intent over time as the possibilities change generates new insights.

Pushing through the strategy process on an ongoing basis match overall organization needs only when a team is sufficiently representative. That's the tie-in between strategy and governance.

In many cases, the Web strategy will include existing processes that need to be integrated within the organization's Web site. The ability to "close the loop" across several vertical areas of the organization requires representation from stakeholders. These stakeholders are often the same individuals identified by the overall business strategy who will play this role regardless of the technology chosen. Aligning internal and external stakeholders for each product or service assures that all areas are represented and is critical to aligning strategic priorities.

To have staying power past the short-term, a Web strategy should produce measurable results with links to business value. Early pilots often illustrate potential value and help mobilize critical sponsorship and resources. Delivery of consistent results depends on risk taking, ability to innovate, failing fast, and collaborating across traditional lines. Effective governance and oversight can set up the pre-conditions required to enable horizontal coordination. Without it, a strategy is an expensive way to fill bookshelves with pretty binders.

OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNANCE

Developing a successful Web culture relies heavily on direct involvement at every level of the organization from executive to middle management and on down to those serving on the frontlines. One difficulty in using Internet technologies to meet business goals is that the approaches required tend to be horizontal within an organization. While one single vertical area can pilot technologies and show their potential value, large chunks of the organization need to cooperate to make broader innovation happen. An example is establishing bill paying capabilities in a hospital environment. To provide customers with the ability to pay bills online requires integration of patient registration tools, clinical systems with

their diagnostic codes and patient identifiers, and accounting systems and their electronic funds interfaces. Oversight, sometimes called governance or steering structures, helps make that type of broad cooperation possible by pulling together representation from a wide range of relevant teams. Effectively executed and aimed at strategic initiatives, governance creates the condition of connectedness, engagement and ownership.

Involvement can take many forms. At the highest level, governance takes the form of C-level (CFO, CIO) and directors who are responsible for a specific service line or product within the organization. At this level, group members understand that the use of Web technology is pivotal to the overall goals of the organization. As a consequence, they prioritize investments and provide sponsorship to ensure strategic projects are carried out effectively. Since many of these projects span across the organization, they are often organizationally complex, making visible sponsorship a requirement for success. But a few high priority projects launched at the top level of the organization are not transformational. They act as catalysts, provided that additional structure works effectively. These types of projects can also illustrate the idea of failing fast. Many projects that provide a step change in productivity take a few twists and turns. Realizing very quickly which approaches don't work and discarding them without acrimony or retribution can prove to your most creative employees that it is safe to innovate. Courageous project leadership is part of Web culture.

The next level of governance takes the form of committees, subcommittees, and task forces. These are responsible for more localized horizontal integration. Aside from their stated purposes of aligning departmental actions with high level strategies, these groups often socialize potential directions, educating and building consensus as well as working to diminish barriers, identify competing cultures, and manage change. Because of their more localized nature, teams at this level of governance

are particularly effective at integrating the end users' needs into strategies and initiatives.

Line employees have a couple roles in governance. In organizations with cultures of openness and adaptability, ideas flow equally well upward in the organizational structure. Grass-roots ideas and mini-pilots are often the initial seeds for larger projects. Their input on tools, approaches, and user needs can be pivotal. The second role merges with execution. They roll out new infrastructure, collaborate with peers to develop shared tools and content, and follow the standards necessary for interoperability. Many organizations with the most ability to execute have a centralized team that creates and glues together the governance layers described.

A centralized Web team can catalyze the collaboration, establish and guide the governance structure, provide high value shared tools, and set up the complex set of interactions needed for success. With a Web center in place that supports some shared infrastructure, such as a Web content management system, the Web center ends up being the strategic mover. The team focuses on integrating new capabilities based on synergy with distributed content providers and less on day-to-day site management activities.

STANDARDS

Sometimes, pushing standards within an organization can be challenging, yet they are key to making sure that the use of Internet or Web technology is consistent and cohesive across the organization. Organizations with a supportive Web culture generally have greater endorsement and adoption of Web development standards because the culture itself is based on similar attitudes and values for using Web technology. In general, participants within the culture care more about the larger effort than their own individual contribution. Although there are many different types of standards that can be considered (see my "Top 10 Rules for Pushing Standards Across Your Web Efforts, *ONLINE*, v. 25, n. 4, January/February 2002, pp. 81–84), the Web Center is a key agent in identifying the standards, integrating these standards across the organizational Web development effort, and "policing" the landscape to make sure standards are followed.

Facilitate Participation

Participation in Web development activities is often a fine-tuned balancing act between those activities and resources that must remain centralized, such as brand management, and those activities that can be decentralized in order to facilitate organization-wide participation, such as content contribution. Spreading the responsibility of site ownership across many departments and content contributors facilitates overall site management, but has the added benefit of allowing departments to speak directly to their customers.

Putting this level of ownership in the hands of individual contributors is key to a successful Web culture. However, empowerment and overall site management can be at odds unless participation takes place within a framework of clearly defined standards to guide design, content, functionality, and process. It wasn't too long ago that Web development activities were limited to the technically inclined few—obviously not a situation that encouraged a Web culture. Today, with advanced tools making Web site development as simple as using a word processor and with increasingly sophisticated content management systems on the market, providing the necessary tools and technical infrastructure are becoming a key foundational element for growing a successful Web culture.

Pooling Organizational Web Resources

I've always been a strong proponent of centralizing core Web development resources within a single group that serves the entire organization. Having worked within organizations where Web resources were decentralized and within organizations that advocated a centralized approach, I can attest to the efficiencies that can be gained from a centralized arrangement. Whether located in IT, marketing, or reporting directly to the CEO, with a strong Web culture to guide the effort, location of the central Web group becomes a moot point (although it can be a contentious issue in many organizations). With content participation distributed, a central Web team can concentrate on developing and managing the necessary technical infrastructure and tools, which when delivered successfully can remove almost all technical barriers to participation. In addition, the central team assures that policies and procedures for Web development are followed. The team can also be a mechanism to develop and spread cultural attributes like willingness to experiment and horizontal collaboration.

Why is having a Web culture something you should strive for? Is it really necessary to the effective use of Web technology? You might be scratching your head trying to determine if you need culture before technology or vice versa—the classic chicken and egg conundrum. Actually, cultures evolve over time. Cultures aren't mandated or addressed by convening a committee. They happen by providing the framework previously discussed and facilitating broad participation and education across the organization. Cultures are reinforced by the behaviors that are recognized and rewarded. Organizations without a supportive Web culture generally can't get enough traction to get profound advantages from the Web due to lack of resources, cross-divisional support, or both. They may not have the cultural chops to innovate and take the risks involved in step change.

Applications of Internet or Web technologies that truly transform an organization require broad organization-wide commitment and participation to be successful. Web cultures help to structure and facilitate this level of activity.

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