

# Content Still Rules, but Context is Now King

By Dan Latendre, CEO, Igloo Software

**T**oday, both communication and collaboration tend to exist outside of the flow of work. Content is stored in one system and communication occurs in another. Take the process of co-authoring a document, one of the most common forms of workplace collaboration. The back-and-forth conversation around those files typically happens over email or IM. Then, final versions are published to a shared drive or ECM system (after you've sifted through the countless messages and manually merged everybody's feedback and comments).

With the constant switching between applications, sometimes it seems virtually impossible to have a single view of what matters. You may use Outlook for email; some combination of ERP, HRM, CRM and ECM to capture corporate records; perhaps a basic intranet for broadcasting internal news. Your activities are always straddling multiple applications, as you move between systems of record and systems of engagement. To top it off, the live discussions that occur often go unrecorded, which inevitably leads to more email threads, status meetings and general confusion.

## Finding Information Will Only Get Harder from Here

Knowledge work is inherently unstructured because it's based on the interaction between people and it's only increasing. Business models founded on command and control, automation and repeatable processes, are giving way to structures that are less hierarchical and more dynamic. The pace of interaction is accelerating as organizations adapt to a rapidly changing business environment and increased volatility. Most of all, work is becoming less and less about routine as teams form and disband quickly across borders and boundaries.

The unstructured and ad hoc nature of work means that a significant amount of time is wasted each and every day. According to an IBM Global CEO Study, *Capitalizing on Complexity*, two hours per employee, per day is spent looking for the right information and expertise. Add the fact that the volume of information is still growing and the velocity of information

has increased, and the problem of speed of access to knowledge is even more acute.

As social technologies are introduced to business, it becomes far easier to share unstructured and ad hoc information. Workflow and employee interactions become more visible, and that decreases the time it takes to find information to solve problems. But if social increases the volume and velocity of information, structure and context make that information relevant and searchable.

Whether you're publishing a blog, posting a forum or sharing a small burst of information via a microblog, you should have the ability to target that sharing based on the notion of audiences. People can then tune into conversations based on their role, permissions and the groups they belong to. You should also be able to choose who and what you follow, embed those feeds into specific spaces and participate much more efficiently in conversations, as you work.

A defined taxonomy aligns content to a set of defined and accepted keywords. This metadata helps to connect related social content and organize it around a known construct. You can then add further context through descriptions, ratings and comments, so that you know: who created it, why it was created, where it's being used and what people think about it.

Social profiles are another means of establishing context. They connect your online identity to your contributions, so people can understand who you are and where your expertise lies. They also set the framework for future applications which will allow for personalized and relevant content based on your social identity.

## Apply Structure to the Unstructured

In theory, social and structure are divisive concepts. A completely social approach to collaboration leaves people virtually unregulated, without rules, barriers or restrictions. It is much more lax in nature and may provide some general guidelines, but nothing which is really strictly enforced. And this leads to the assumption that this type of activity is beyond management and control. That, of course, is simply untrue.

All social business initiatives require some degree of structure. It's not an all-or-nothing proposition. The question is how much is necessary to avoid the email overload problem, tenfold?

A company's appetite for a more open approach to collaboration is unique to that business. An innovative start-up may be born social, while a more mature business may be risk averse. In that case, social concepts should be introduced in a controlled and actionable way. Enforce certain things, but also allow employees to have freedom to collaborate and gradually reduce restrictive permissions over time.

Email is a prime example of unstructured collaboration on a grand scale, but it is also a one-to-many form of communication that isolates content and creates silos. And although it has become ubiquitous in our work life, it has certainly created some bad habits. Distribution lists and "reply alls" are annoying and inefficient ways to collaborate, and the conversation that occurs is often separated from where that content and knowledge resides.

## Create a Single Place to Work

Integrating content, applications, tasks, messaging and other communication tools is essential to collaborating in context. It creates a single digital workplace, so the unstructured social sharing can happen in the same system as your day-to-day tasks.

If your collaboration tools require switching applications mid-stream, user adoption will languish. People don't like to repeatedly "Alt-Tab" between applications. This is why knowledge management applications, in their original form, have largely failed. Knowledge capture and sharing were disconnected from the natural way in which we work.

When work happens in the context of a shared collaborative space, it eliminates the time needed for teams to sync-up. It eases decision-making, builds the company's knowledgebase and allows collaboration to occur between people that were not necessarily part of the initial conversation. That's the power of context and control. ■

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Igloo Software develops social business solutions for your employees, your partners and your customers—securely stored and delivered in the cloud. Learn more at [www.igloosoftware.com](http://www.igloosoftware.com).