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What Does it Take for Social Software to Succeed in DoD?

Brian Drake

How many of us have been faced with this situation?

A budding DoD executive pops into your cube and says, “Hey, I heard about this thing called Pinterest. I went on it last night and I thought it was really cool. I think we need Pinterest for the office. Will you help me?”

If you’re not stunned by the suggestion, you’d probably respond by saying, “What’s Pinterest?” And you wouldn’t be alone.

Across the federal government, departments are diving into social software solutions for all sorts of mission needs. Some of those installations are screaming successes that are praised inside and outside of government. Others are

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miserable failures that have program managers of all stripes cursing the names of Jimmy Wales and Mark Zuckerberg.

Some of the successes are a confluence of luck, timing, and the presence of talented people who care enough to make the initiative succeed. The failures share common short-comings in programmatic control, project design, and procurement strategy. Navigating this minefield can be a frustrating experience that few wish to replicate. Those who know how find that the return on investment far exceeded expectations. In a hostile budgetary environment, selecting the right solution for your organization has never been more important.

I have been intimately involved in two enterprise-wide social software (otherwise known as Enterprise 2.0) implementations. One was A-Space, also known as the "Facebook for Spies," for the Office of the Director for National Intelligence (ODNI). The other was D.Wiki, which I founded while employed at Deloitte Consulting. Both programs generated significant gains for each organization but left many outsiders asking, "How did you do it?"

Aside from having some of the best leaders, partners, and social software evangelists in the business to work with, we followed a few guideposts for effective program management. These are just a few suggestions on how to implement your own social software solutions for the DoD.

The Mission Always Comes First

No matter how exuberant that budding government executive in your cube is, you need to ask a set of probing questions to define and scope the effort.

- What's the problem you're trying to solve?
- Who else agrees with your view of the problem?
- When does the problem need to be solved?
- Why hasn't anyone taken action to solve the problem?
- How does social software address the problem?

Some of these are just good program and procurement planning questions. More importantly, they attempt to throttle back the raw, sometimes counterproductive, excitement that Enterprise 2.0 solutions have generated across the DoD. Too often the novelty of a new software solution overwhelms the principal responsibility of every procurement professional; pro-

tecting taxpayer interests. Be prepared for the government executive clutching her or his copy of *Wikinomics*, citing studies about the miracle of crowdsourcing, and the value of social software realized by skeptical businesses.

No doubt there are many case examples of businesses and government agencies that overcame tremendous psychological and organizational barriers to achieve unrealized gains. In each of those examples, easy answers could be supplied to the questions above. If they can't be supplied in a 5-minute conversation with the customer, then some more research needs to be done.

Defining Success

Too often Enterprise 2.0 ventures fail because no one spent the time to think through, describe, and document what a successful social software program looks like for their organization. Ask yourself or the prospective program manager:

- What do you consider to be mission success for this problem?

If this answer is not readily apparent, ask:

- Who determines what constitutes mission success?
- What would they say forward progress looks like?
- When would one expect this goal to be reached?
- How is your solution less costly, improve efficiency, or appreciably increase the quality of service delivery compared to other options?

At the outset, you and your customer may not have the answer to these questions. That's okay. Consider this list a step toward establishing a baseline of expectations for the program. It assists with being able to identify tangible and intangible successes for the program. If the answers are held by higher management, don't be afraid to ask them for help.

Preparing for Success

Every effective program, whether it's building an aircraft carrier or buying a desk, starts with a set of clear requirements. Many DoD contracting officers and representatives are familiar with the axiom "garbage in, garbage out." This is especially true when seeking any custom or off-the-shelf software solution.

Software is one thing, but what puts the “social” in the software is people. Getting the right mix of people to build your collaborative community is perhaps one of the most overlooked requirements to keep a collaborative ecosystem vibrant. On the A-Space program, I managed a team of five consultants to assist users with crowd building, collaboration techniques, and simple technical support issues. Beyond the mechanics of their day-to-day operations, the A-Space Analytic Support Desk (ASD):

- Gave users the ability to reach out to complete strangers that worked in one of the other intelligence agencies,
- Closely communicated with users on their technical issues and sought speedy solutions,
- Shared and helped implement practical collaboration strategies for intelligence analysts,
- Assisted in notifying supervisors of significant mission accomplishments made by their analysts,
- Captured new user requirements based on shifting mission priorities, and
- Identified and warned of system problems before normal users became aware of a problem.

The ASD had many responsibilities, but implicit amongst them was instilling confidence in the user base. The ASD became the “canary in the coalmine” when the system was experiencing some early growing pains. They communicated, at an interpersonal level, the value of the system to the workforce and gave the users a reason to keep coming back. Unlike a traditional IT help desk, whose primary metric is how fast it can close a ticket, the A-Space ASD treated every encounter as an opportunity to learn from users. The longer you had them on the phone and talking about their problems, the better. This personal touch paid huge dividends to the A-Space program in terms of data collection, customer service, and, most importantly, user adoption.

Measuring Success

Metrics make or break an Enterprise 2.0 effort.

Taking the necessary steps to define and prepare for success are irrelevant if you can’t generate credible, defensible data to win out-year budget battles. That’s when a relentless metrics collection activity pays off. For the A-Space program, success was defined by mission outcomes driven by intelligence

analysis. This broad definition of success guided the selection of some near-term, mid-term, and long-term goals for the program. Progress against those goals was tied to a metrics program that measured any number of factors including membership, collaborative activities, and other key indicators of mission accomplishment. The A-Space team also collected a library of anecdotal success stories to illustrate how the intelligence mission was being improved through collaboration. This time-intensive effort made the job of the ODNI’s senior executives infinitely easier when it was budget justification time. Better still, because A-Space was such a raging success, ODNI leaders were able to use short, meaningful statistics or high-impact anecdotes to quickly illustrate A-Space’s value to skeptics.

At Deloitte, I witnessed the enterprise struggle with how to collaborate in an increasingly connected and information-rich environment. Deloitte views collaboration among its employees as its competitive advantage. With a mobile workforce of over 150,000 employees globally, a robust technical collaboration solution was essential. Many information technology platforms were considered and beta-tested. Among those that were officially accepted by the Global Deloitte Firm was D.Wiki. Based on free, open sourced software, D.Wiki began as a method to broadly share information about firm activities, accounts, and best practices. The D.Wiki team collected a series of metrics on user activity and success stories. While Deloitte’s D.Wiki program ultimately defined success through the lens of profitability, there were several key collaboration metrics that served as surrogates for profit. Increases in membership, number of page views, number of edits, and the number of communities of interest became the hallmarks of success for the program. Within 3 months of D.Wiki’s implementation, the system had more views than all of Deloitte’s internal collaboration websites combined. Within 2 years, D.Wiki amassed more than 11,000 users, 113,000 edits, hundreds of communities of interest, and over 1 million page views. This degree of success made an \$8,000 program into a \$200,000 global, firm-wide investment. None of that program growth would have been possible without metrics.

So What Makes Social Software All that Different?

That young, overly excited executive is still standing in your cube.

If you select low-interest mission tasks, it is less likely to achieve its intended goals. Moreover, if you choose a high-impact mission with tedious tasks, the crowd you need will not follow.

You've listened to an hour of her/him blather on about the "wisdom of crowds" and retweeting the latest Lady Gaga single. You're about ready to permanently "unfriend" her/him. You only hope that she/he has heard some of your advice on how to shape the program. Still, you may be wondering why an Enterprise 2.0 solution poses any real unique challenges.

Simply put, every social software solution entails a higher degree of programmatic risk than what we have ever experienced in the procurement community. In a traditional weapon system build, there is a designated prime contractor and at least "one throat to choke." In a crowdsourced solution, no one and everyone is responsible for the mission outcome. This makes it extremely difficult for a program manager to use contract clauses or funding levels to entice the contractor to perform. An Enterprise 2.0 program manager must learn the art of collaboration, the incentives for swarming, and the contributing factors for knowledge discovery.

It is important to carefully select the mission that is best suited to a social software solution. This is somewhat of a catch-22 for the average government innovator. The programmatic risk inherent in Enterprise 2.0 ideas often relegates them to low-impact mission areas and predestines their failure. Exciting, difficult, and ambiguous mission problems benefit the most from social software because it emotionally engages and motivates the participants. That psychic energy builds momentum for the program and contributes greatly to the prospects of

its success. If you select low-interest mission tasks, it is less likely to achieve its intended goals. Moreover, if you choose a high-impact mission with tedious tasks, the crowd you need will not follow. No one wants to work on a collaborative enclave that makes the tasking system more efficient. Everyone wants to work on a counterterrorism targeting project called "Facebook for Scumbags."

In the near future, we will have to come to grips with accepting more risk when it comes to purchasing software and services that support crowdsourcing. As the global marketplace diversifies and greater efficiencies are being demanded of our contractors, we should expect that they will use smart mobs to help meet DoD needs. Accepting that risk means we need to adopt program management strategies and practices that mitigate the adverse impacts of these risks.

For all the bluster and hype that Web 2.0 enjoyed in the mid-2000s, we still struggle with how the mission of the Department of Defense is better served by leveraging these technologies and ideas. Just like Deloitte, collaboration offers the DoD a competitive advantage over our adversaries. We would be foolish not to find every way possible to better discover information, connect with colleagues, and synchronize mission operations. Building this capability begins and ends with effective program management and procurement planning. ☞

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