Wanted: An Active, Viable, Collaborative On-line Community

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Executive summary

On-line communities now play a major role in how individuals and businesses evaluate offerings, make decisions, and buy products. Even though 70% of Fortune 100 companies have launched internal social networks, an equally high percentage of public social networks launched will fail by the end of the year. This paper explores the elements of internal on-line community success, and provides examples of how Schneider Electric addresses this challenge.
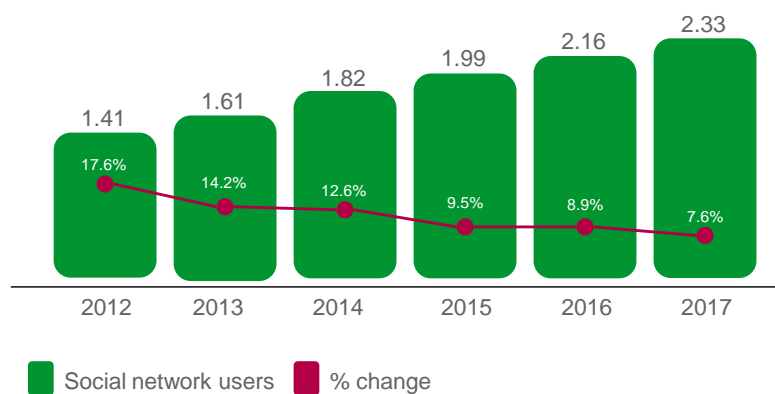
998-2095-03-19-14AR0

Schneider Electric

Introduction

What is driving the creation of internal communities in companies today? On the "tools" side, over 70% of the Fortune 100 report launching internal social networks to help facilitate communication.[1] On the "human" side, individuals across corporations are seeking to find and interact with peers and experts within their own companies who share a common business challenge or interest. Corporate executives are investing in "social" because they recognize potential gains in employee productivity and want to leverage communities to connect with employees and better understand their needs. In the outside world, many companies believe that money can be made though leveraging the 2.3 billion people currently involved in social networking (see **Figure 1**), However, many companies are still struggling to execute on that vision.

Industry leaders are noticing that the ways people make "educated" decisions in the workplace is evolving. Content gathering processes are characterized by some of the following phenomena:

- A distributed, mobile workforce is bombarded with information but needs a fast and efficient way to navigate through the data (identify relevant people, content, and expertise) in order to perform their daily tasks efficiently.

- Global companies whose resources are scattered across geographies and time zones struggle to generate just-in-time and effective communication. New collaborative technologies are beginning to hint at connectivity solutions in these environments.

- Traditional network drives, storage systems and flat intranets are being viewed as inefficient and, as a result, are underutilized.

- As volumes of email and meetings increase, a simultaneous *decrease* in productivity is occurring.

- Organizational emphasis on only management personnel as a source for setting policy is now shifting to more effective involvement of the rank and file workforce.

Figure 1

Social network users will soon top 2.3 billion worldwide (courtesy of eMarketer.com)

Social Network Users Worldwide, 2012-2017

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Social network users	1.41	1.61	1.82	1.99	2.16	2.33
% change	17.6%	14.2%	12.6%	9.5%	8.9%	7.6%

Note: internet users who use a social network site via any device at least once per month
Source: eMarketer, Nov 2013

Schneider Electric has taken into account these marketing and societal changes and has developed strategies for implementing communities among its internal social networks.

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[1] http://good2bsocial.com/2013/10/23/five-tips-for-measuring-the-roi-of-your-enterprise-social-network/

Collaboration example

What defines the success or failure of a social network? One of Schneider Electric's fledging communities provides a good example. In this case a Schneider employee was attempting to respond to a customer requirement. The internal Schneider Electric stakeholder decided to analyze a utility customer's proposal for the creation of a mobile electricity substation. As most of the public knows, substations, for the most part, are fixed to the ground and are comprised of heavy, immobile transformers, wires, and switchgear. This particular stakeholder decided to look to a community of internal Schneider Electric employees for help on how to design, assemble, and implement such a mobile solution.

The challenge for the stakeholder was how to create a complete technical solution that would work. The first step was to identify a viable partner with experience in the area of trailer / container construction. The stakeholder decided to reach out to a wider audience within Schneider Electric, which included numerous social communities, and posted his requirement on an internal social networking tool called Spice.

Within 24 hours of posting, 3 responses came in from world-wide community members. Within a month, a total of 25 responses had streamed in. Experts began to share their past experiences with various container construction vendors. More than 13 references of manufacturing facilities capable of undertaking such a construction project were posted. Innovative suggestions on sourcing of specialized equipment and materials were proposed.

For the stakeholder in question, his knowledgebase on mobile substation solutions was immediately expanded. He gained education on both in-house and partner design approaches. He quickly developed a database of suppliers for needed materials and also established a checklist of best practices for mobile container design. Additional educational resources were shared as a series of posts grew into more substantial one-on-many conversations.

Based upon the collaborative advice received, the stakeholder and his team received a deeper understanding of the marketplace. Links among the various experts were reinforced. A solution was built based on the utility customer requirements (see **Figure 2**). The customer's issue was addressed and now Schneider Electric has a new, innovative solution that can be offered to new customers.

Figure 2

The mobile electricity substation solution was conceived as a result of community collaboration

"Community" defined

A community is a group of people who, for a specific subject, share a specialty, craft, role, profession, passion, interest, concern, or a set of problems. Community members deepen their understanding of the subject by:

- Interacting on an ongoing basis
- Asking and answering questions
- Sharing information
- Reusing good ideas
- Solving problems for one another
- Developing new and better ways of doing things

Online communities provide these benefits by offering a piece of cyberspace that allows people to interact with other passionate experts who they may never meet in everyday life. A community is NOT a tool like Tibbr, Jive, or a LinkedIn group. It is a group of people who voluntary decide to share information and insights.

Employee benefits

"The members were feeling lonely in their location. The community has broken their isolation, bringing visibility and access to resources".

- Metals and Treatments Community Sponsor

In many large companies, employees can feel disconnected and lost in a sea of information. Communities connect people and create an open, shared social space that strengthens relationships across geographic and functional boundaries. More than 75% of corporate executives turn to their company internal social network for suggestions on solving problems, selecting products and reaching goals. Today's digital employee also turns to their internal on-line network to gather information, ask questions, locate experts, and stay connected to their company.

Employees who participate in social networks and communities cite the following benefits:

- Increased job satisfaction
- Greater transparency into decision-making process
- Open lines of communication
- Increased company and product knowledge
- Faster problem resolution

Corporate benefits

On the **strategic level**, communities promote innovation and collaboration within corporations. Business intelligence and customer intelligence is shared to align strategy. The community collaboration improves processes, promotes successful re-use of information, and engages employees.

On the **organizational level**, communities transfer knowledge and competencies among members, build sustainable expertise, and improve processes and systems (see **Figure 3**).

On the **operational level** communities have a positive impact on reaction time, speed in solving problems, and on performance, encouraging the free sharing of good ideas and the adoption of best practices.
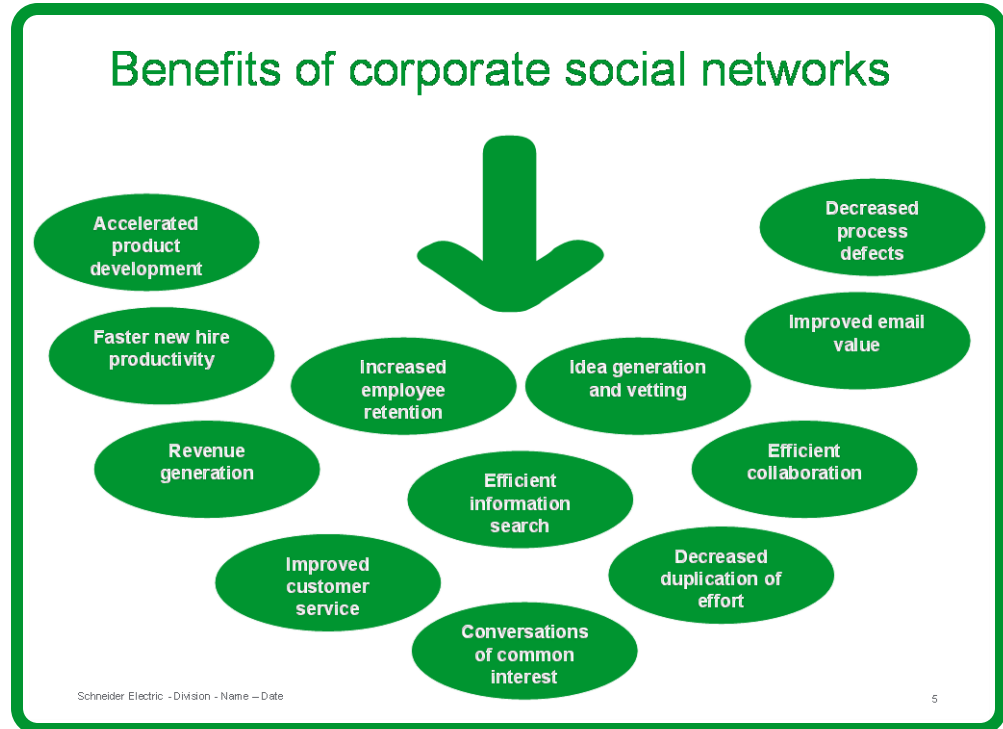
Figure 3

The benefits of social networking span through all levels of an organization

Customer benefits

Just as a company might benefit from internal communities, customers who access external communities see the benefits as well. These include:

- Higher level of innovation seen from the company
- Improved customer support
- Faster response times
- Higher satisfaction

Internal communities

Internal communities help drive company growth because they allow individuals to tap into groups that can support them in fulfilling their everyday tasks in an efficient manner. Employees can "push" conversations centered on how to better accommodate customer requirements thereby driving market responsiveness. The communities are also a great forum for gathering feedback on products, systems, internal functions, projects, and initiatives.

In 2012, Schneider Electric President and Chief Executive Office Jean Pascal Tricoire posed the following rhetorical question to all employees through a Connect program community: "What if Schneider knew what Schneider knows?"

In posing this question, he hoped to generate thought and awareness around the following important issues:

1. The drive to increase internal sharing and collaboration
2. The need to break down organizational silos
3. The initiative to increase use of new technologies to share information

In 2012 only 35% of employees in Schneider Electric believed that different departments were successful at cooperating with each other. An internal goal set for the end of 2014 was to create 30 new active communities to help drive collaboration in areas critical to Schneider Electric business. The purpose of that goal was to break silos and to foster collaboration in the flow of work, and to increase visibility and participation. It was also made clear that collaboration was less about tools and more about personal behavior.

Fulfilling this new mandate required a change in corporate culture. Underpinning this change were the following four principles:

1. Collaboration starts by sharing
2. Sharing starts by giving time, knowledge, and expertise to others within the corporation
3. Information that is not shared is lost
4. Don't reinvent the wheel! Use what's been done… and build upon it

Schneider Electric decided to focus its effort on the Communities of Practice approach (see **Table 1**) referred to internally as Communities@Work, to drive thinking and activities that encompass a concept called "Communities for our Collective Intelligence".

Table 1

Definitions of the various types of corporate social network communities

Type of Community	Definition
Community of practice (CoP)	A cross-functional group of people who share activities on a professional topic to reach strategic objectives. Such a group may be formed based around a technology, a business unit, a product range, or a customer issue. Membership is usually voluntary and the community life is on-going until the community purpose disappears.
Community of interest (CoI)	This group is formed to discuss either professional or non-professional topics that might exist in a company. These members are usually less engaged than in a CoP and have no specific business objective address. An example is a "café" where employees can share interesting articles, ask general questions, or reach out to like minded individuals. Membership is voluntary and community life is on-going until the community purpose disappears
Project team	Project teams exist to solve problems and then disband after the goal is achieved. Members are assigned to a project team with a project manager in the lead. Specific deliverables and accountability are characteristic of this type of community.
Organization team	Organizational teams align around a particular organization, function, or group in a company. These groups are often mandatory and operation is ongoing.

As of February 2014, 97 communities representing 15,000 employees followed the "Communities@Work" model. Each of these communities has a business sponsor, a leader with time dedicated to animate the community and a charter which explains how the community benefits both the business and the members.

How a community works

Within the context of a community, a variety of roles and responsibilities exist in order to make the community an effective functioning body:

Community leader
The community leader drives the community activity by creating events and promotion on a regular basis. He / she stimulates and maintains the community dynamic and implements governance rules. The leader also encourages member collaboration through regular communication and feedback. Such a leader should be passionate and be willing to dedicate 10 to 20% of his / her working time to the community.

Core team members
The core team members are local advocates based in different geographical zones who maintain regular contact with the community leader. They assist in the animation of the community. Typically they dedicate between 2 to 5% of their working time to community activities. In the event the leader has an unexpected increase of activity and no additional time to animate the community, his core team members will help him / her to maintain the community activity. The existence of core members in various geographical zones helps to facilitate the participation and contribution of general members.

General members
The general members participate and contribute to the community life in a variety of ways. They should participate at least 15 minutes per day. If the general members don't engage the community on a weekly basis, they won't see the benefit of the community. They will spend time and energy catching up on community activities rather than interacting with their peers. Leaders and core members can help assist general members by training them how to easily locate interesting and relevant content.

Community sponsor
The community sponsor supports and promotes the community to groups outside of the immediate community. He / she encourages knowledge sharing by encouraging an environment of openness and free thinking. He / she ensures that resources to support the community are allocated as needed. The sponsor and community leader should meet at least once a month. The sponsor provides the community with legitimacy within the greater Schneider Electric community. The sponsor also ensures that community objectives are aligned with the global strategy of the company.

Figure 4 summarizes the key steps taken when implementing a new community:

"Communities… can be used to help employees learn from past experiences and accelerate the implementation of our new ideas to generate more business".

- Sales Excellence Community Sponsor

Figure 4
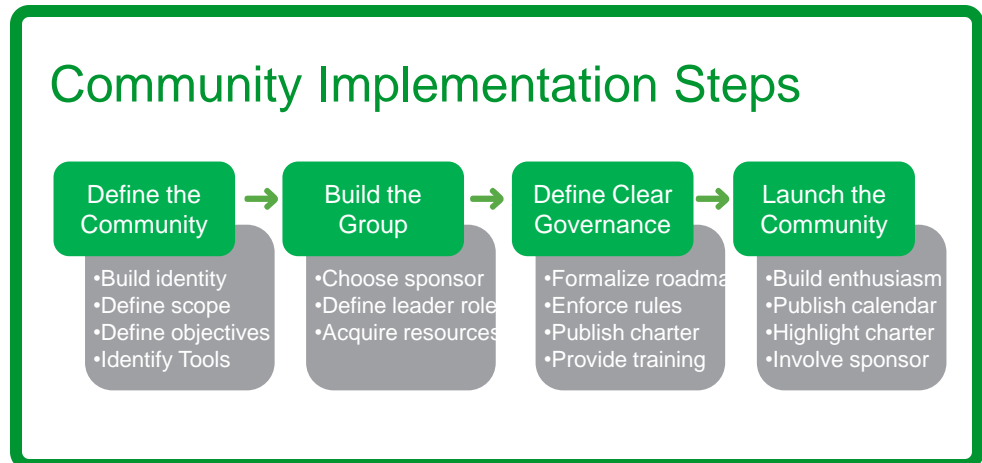*Summary of key steps to be taken when implementing a collaborative on-line community*

Community Implementation Steps

Define the Community	Build the Group	Define Clear Governance	Launch the Community
•Build identity •Define scope •Define objectives •Identify Tools	•Choose sponsor •Define leader role •Acquire resources	•Formalize roadma •Enforce rules •Publish charter •Provide training	•Build enthusiasm •Publish calendar •Highlight charter •Involve sponsor

Measuring success

In order to move forward and progress, the community needs to be able to gather and publish information regarding overall performance. Community-generated formal metrics help to demonstrate value, help to quantify the impact on the work environment, and help to illustrate how the members benefit. The various metrics generated should align to the following activity categories:

Adoption and participation metrics – This consists of numbers such as how many members participate, how many posts are generated, and which of the posts have generated the most traffic or most number of "likes".

Engagement and satisfaction metrics – These metrics are generally gathered through the use of surveys. One survey measures the engagement of the members within the community and asks a question similar to "How likely are you to recommend community participation to another Schneider Electric employee?" The answer to this question quickly provides an appreciation for the level of engagement of members.

A second survey measures the satisfaction of the members within the community, based on the community's reaction to the following statement:

"I consider that the community I have selected is an 'ACTIVE Community', because it

- Provides value to me, my job, my business
- Allows me to learn from the other members regularly
- Allows me to collaborate with other members
- Allows me to get from or provide support to other members

Answer: Strongly agree / Agree / Disagree / Strongly disagree"

Publication of member and user success stories – Although difficult to gather without a concerted effort, anecdotes and stories of success help to build the credibility of the community. These stories help to demonstrate the value of the community to "side line" members and also reveal the impact on the business.

Anticipate challenges

Community leaders often face both behavioral challenges and technical issues that reduce the on-boarding of more members. Roadblocks to collaboration are the lack of time, a limited collaborative working culture, a limited digital culture, and technical issues. According the maturity of the audience, these challenges will take more or less time to be addressed.

The adoption of community concepts, enterprise social network usages, and collaborative working modes depends on the maturity of the audience. Community leaders have discovered that they have to spend a considerable amount of time and energy to order to inspire their members to participate in community social activities.

Oftentimes, community leaders will feel alone in animating their community. When the "champions" and core members are nominated and not volunteers, they aren't motivated to help the community leader. In addition, the sponsor is usually an executive with many demands on his / her time who can't be available to support the community as much as the leader would like.

Employees who participate in the community also have to develop new work habits when transitioning to a collaborative mode. Some members are not very digitally engaged. They only "like" posts and aren't comfortable with posting something themselves. Leaders might

"Members are shy and not comfortable about sharing. Some members called me to have my 'validation' before posting! I was very surprised."

- Community leader

notice that most of their members are only "readers". They want to absorb the added-value of the community, but they aren't ready to contribute just yet, for a number of different reasons.

Best practices

To help overcome these challenges, a number of best practices can help to either revitalize an existing community or to jumpstart a new one. Implementation of four critical steps will determine whether or not the community is successful.

Acquiring sponsorship

Schneider Electric now assigns an Executive Committee member and a central team of 3 people to support the "Communities for our Collective Intelligence". This lesson was learned the "hard way" between 2003 and 2007. Back then, a program was rolled out to help communities flourish. However, the company changed focus and the leader of the community program left the company. The communities became hidden and then slowly dwindled in importance and influence. When the Communities program was launched again in 2011, the downward spiral was reversed because conditions were established that would provide a long term and sustainable program. A network of community leaders was established with firm commitments to growing the communities.

Writing and publishing the charter

Spending time writing a charter, defining roles and responsibilities of members, and setting up governance rules is not the most stimulating part of creating an on-line community. However, lack of these key pieces results in failure of the community. According to one community leader, "At the beginning, I saw the governance as a pain in the neck. But I admit the charter was very useful in giving members a sense of belonging and engagement".

Identifying success factors

Figure 5 summarizes some additional factors that create online community success (based on a survey which gathered feedback from Schneider Electric community participants).

Figure 5

Factors that predict whether an online collaborative community will succeed

Key Success Factors

- Right support organization
- Structured community launch with shared charter
- Sponsor engagement
- Community size
- Endorsement
- Member Behavior
- Activity frequency
- Time dedication
- Alignment with objectives and culture

The social communities at Schneider Electric also identified those factors that had **no** impact on the success of the community. These include the following:

- Age and seniority of the members
- Category of the community
- Size of business
- Business Unit
- Digital activity of the community
- Number of messages exchanged
- Tools used

Understanding the drivers of success within a company can help set appropriate expectations for participation, can overcome obstacles, and can help to select the right levers to drive success.

Communicate and educate

Online communities are a tool for change management within an organization. Similar to a business strategy, communities are never "done" and therefore constant communication must take place in order to ensure that communities flourish.

The key communication "talking points" include the following topics:

1. Goals for internal communities
2. How to participate
3. Where to go for help

Tools utilized at Schneider Electric include training materials for sponsors, community leaders, and community participants. In addition, monthly webinars with community leaders are scheduled to share wins, challenges, and best practices.

Conclusion

Communities allow employees to feel empowered to solve problems and positively impact customers. Knowledge sharing ignites conversations that build bridges across different departments within a company. The best practices and lessons learned described in this white paper will help simplify the creation of a community program that can deliver internal efficiencies and external brand recognition.

In order to jumpstart an on-line collaborative community program initiative, the following steps are recommended:

Within the next few weeks: Begin to plan a roadmap. Identify those benefits that the department would like to accrue as a result launching a community.

Within the next 6 months: Identify an initial community with low up-front investment that can produce positive results over a relatively short period of time (a highly focused community, with a motivated leader, a clear list of members, and a business sponsor). This serves as an effective initial trial balloon. Then the members themselves will bring it to new heights.

Within the next year: Identify areas where online communities could deliver additional benefits. Identify a high level sponsor for the community program in the company and agree on a scope, budget, and resources for the program.

Within 2 years: Create a long term sustainability plan for the program and other related communities. Create succession plans for sponsors and leaders and deploy a long-term monitoring and measurement program.

✎ About the authors

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