

Enabling Collaborative Platform Adoption

Successful collaborative platform strategies provide value for users by improving knowledge sharing, strengthening weak-tie relationships, mapping informal organizational structures, and enhancing the efficiency of team and group activities. But, becoming a collaborative enterprise is not going to happen by serendipity. Platform success is dependent on user adoption, which is in turn based on thoughtful design and forward-thinking enterprise processes. Successful, sustainable collaborative platform strategies must be designed, from the ground up, around three major factors: usability, impact, and organizational readiness. With close attention to each of these factors, organizations can position themselves to harness the power of collaborative platforms in pursuit of real business objectives, driving both top and bottom line growth.

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INTRODUCTION

Successful collaborative platform strategies provide value for users by improving knowledge sharing, strengthening weak-tie relationships, mapping informal organizational structures, and enhancing the efficiency of team and group activities. Because of these benefits, many enterprises have been tantalized by the promise of collaborative technologies claiming to offer everything from better innovation to streamlined workflows.

But the actual results are often less than inspiring: IT budgets swell in support of tools that nobody uses. More often than not, this is the result of a “build it and they will come” mentality that has proven time and again to fail to drive adoption. What’s more, existing platform choices require companies to force fit their workflow and culture into the technology, creating yet another substantial barrier to adoption.

At Moxie Insight, years of experience and ground breaking research have proven that successful, sustainable collaborative platform strategies must be designed, from the ground up, around three major factors:


- Usability—intuitive, versatile user experience
- Impact—clear benefits to the end user
- Organizational Readiness—honest assessment of collaborative capacity

By ensuring that each of these factors is in place, organizations can position themselves to harness the power of collaborative platforms in pursuit of real business objectives, driving both top and bottom line growth. Below we provide a high level overview of key considerations for each of these enabling factors of platform adoption.

USABILITY

Platform adoption succeeds because of discretionary effort on the part of users. A compelling user experience—enabled through a focus on usability and intuitive design—is an important part of encouraging voluntary investment of discretionary time. Continuously challenging users and encouraging them to push their creative boundaries will also incent repeat use and deeper interaction. As such, a well-designed, sustainable collaborative platform needs to fulfill two, seemingly competing objectives. On one hand, it has to be so intuitive to use that there is very little to no learning curve; on the other, it has to be versatile enough that more advanced users can adapt it to their specific needs.

In terms of initial adoption, the first element is the most critical. The days of being trained on a product are in the past; employees expect the tools provided by their organizations to be just as easy to use as consumer platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google. Interfaces must be visually

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appealing, with a “less is more” approach generally proving effective. Access to any new collaborative technology should be as simple as possible, and systems should conform to the needs of users, not the other way around.

In the consumer world, Web 2.0 technology moves even closer to the ideals of personalized IT by allowing consumers to customize their technology (such as creating mash-ups or installing widgets) and to truly personalize how they interface with applications. Users carry expectations from consumer technology to enterprise technology, caring less about things like security and more about ease-of-use and versatility. Ultimately, any web-based solution is explicitly or implicitly competing with the likes of Facebook and Gmail—if your intranet can’t provide a comparable level of intuitiveness and usability, it’s going to disappoint.

In applications, versatility often boils down to customization, but rigid enterprise systems are a product of decades of IT policy that demanded standardization to facilitate interoperability and lower support costs. Today, companies are rejecting one-size-fits-all technology for more flexible enterprise systems to accommodate the rapid innovation that is forcing business processes to evolve constantly.

Powerful search and filtering technologies, single sign-on, learning algorithms, the integration of mobile applications, and the ability to create secure working groups are but a few of the options required to ensure collaborative technologies are versatile enough to meet the expectations of technology amateurs and gurus alike. Done properly these functions are transparent to the end user, and the solution just works.

IMPACT

An attractive user interface will help draw users to the platform, but sustained use will come from access to useful content, the ability to connect and communicate with stakeholders more efficiently, and incentives that align with knowledge-sharing and platform use.

Any collaborative technology designed for the enterprise has to answer a single question no matter who asks it: “How will this help me do my job?” In the early days of a collaborative platform implementation, it is often viewed as yet another thing somebody is being asked to do—and one that is often ranked relatively low on the priority list. Adoption is challenged by the reality that processes seldom change overnight.

Making this initial impact often requires a change in mindset: while many collaboration platforms grew up as document management applications, the real value of collaboration is not connecting people to content; it’s about connecting people to each other in new and meaningful ways. Digitally connecting people to people creates value in many ways, from enabling ambient intimacy and strengthening weak-tie relationships to helping map and formalize informal work processes and networks.

Rich user profiles are particularly important here, in terms of both driving adoption and sustaining interest. In most large organizations, many people are unknowingly working on projects remarkably similar to what others have already done (or are doing). Robust, searchable, and taggable profiles make finding these people automatic, and can often save an extraordinary amount of redundant work, providing a clear benefit to the end user (think early and under-budget, instead of late and over-budget). If project- and interest-focused relationships are enabled to take hold throughout the organization, efficiency gains can multiply, while new weak-tie networks can emerge to create, refine, and implement new ideas.

Moxie Insight research also shows that the most successful platform initiatives follow a plateau model of adoption where initial deployments are within small work groups to accomplish specific tasks. These initiatives are then scaled up as they demonstrate value and gather a steady base of users that recognize the benefits and are able to evangelize the technology—as well as those on the outside looking in, eager to supplement their capacity with the input of others in a fresh new way.

In this staged approach, more advanced features and functions are rolled out as users become increasingly comfortable with the platform. Every company has its own rhythm and style for getting things done, so collaborative experience designers can't specify the end-to-end productivity narrative up-front; they can't know what will work and what won't. Enterprises should look to iterate early and often based on user feedback—feedback made explicit through surveys and comments, and implicitly by looking at on-site usage habits and feature adoption. As with customers outside the enterprise, people aren't always aware of exactly how they use a product. Sometimes it's better to go beyond asking and look at what people are actually doing.

Whether an organization opts for a company-wide roll out or plateau/evangelism model of adoption, it's always important to keep in mind that collaboration is not an end unto itself; instead, it's a new means of achieving business objectives. Those seeking to drive adoption should always ensure that business objectives—which Moxie Insight has categorized into distinct collaborative intents—are front and center if they hope to achieve meaningful business outcomes. Collaborative intents range from connecting (using collaboration to connect previously unrelated ideas and/or people) to polling (to gather input or determine group-wide preferences) to co-creating (the joint development of products and services with internal and external stakeholders).

ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS

Different organizations are coming to collaboration from a wide range of starting points. Our research shows that one thing is consistent across all organizations: collaboration is sustained not because of a technology platform, but because of a culture. Without an honest assessment of where an organization is today, and what it hopes to achieve, widespread adoption of a collaborative platform strategy is unlikely. There must be some fundamentals in place for collaboration to become rooted in the enterprise before platforms can be considered. Moxie Insight believes organizations need to fully understand the ten enabling factors of collaborative capacity that our research has revealed. Together, they form a framework for identifying how prepared the various parts of the organization are for collaborative success.



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The ten enabling factors of collaborative capacity are:

- **Important, challenging tasks:** Collaboration requires an investment of an individual's time and effort. People are much less likely to collaborate if they feel the work they're doing is routine or unimportant. If the work is routine, with no expectation of improvement or change, there's little to be gained from collaboration. If the task is unimportant, there's little incentive to invest to do it more effectively.
- **Clearly defined individual roles and responsibilities:** Collaboration is enhanced when the roles of individual team members are clearly defined. Ambiguous and overlapping roles, requiring everyone to sort out responsibilities at all stages of the project, simply serve to frustrate and to lead to unproductive behavior. The often-held belief that cooperation is enhanced by letting everyone contribute to everything is incorrect. Confusion does not contribute to collaboration.
- **Productive and efficient behaviors and processes:** Because collaboration requires effort, people are less likely to do it when the collaborative processes themselves are complicated or time-consuming. Too many face-to-face meetings are often viewed by team members as frustrating and counter-productive. With regard to the design of the communication once the task is in progress, when members need to come together frequently to discuss aspects of the task in order to get the work done, they are less likely to cooperate.
- **Existence of trust-based relationships:** The most important priority for companies hoping to strengthen collaboration is to help employees know and trust each other. When there is a culture of trust, people are more willing to cooperate with each other—even when they are of different nationalities, are working virtually, and are relative strangers. The creation of a culture of trust is perhaps one of the trickiest challenges an executive faces, as building trust is a long process, whereas the destruction of trust can happen in a matter of minutes.
- **Prevalence of networking opportunities:** There are some concrete actions that executives can take to encourage a culture of trust to emerge. This requires careful attention to and investments in the development of relationships and networks, of building "social capital" throughout the company. Executives keen to encourage a culture of trust should consider investing in events, both professional and social, that bring people together face-to-face, and supporting the emergence of informal communities in which people naturally congregate around issues of importance to them.
- **Organizational philosophy supporting a "community of adults":** Collaboration requires "adult" behaviors—the exercise of individual judgment and initiative. These behaviors are encouraged and reinforced when the relationship between the individual and the organization reflects the assumption of a "community of adults"—one that is based on trust, transparency, options, and choice.

- **Selection, promotion, and training practices encompassing collaboration:** There are several important practices and processes that are the province of the Human Resources department that make a big difference in a company's capacity to collaborate. These include the level of investment and the philosophies that underlie the company's selection, promotion, and training activities. Selection and promotion decisions should include consideration of the individual's propensity for or track record of collaboration. Training should include building skills associated with successful relationships, including conflict resolution and project management.
- **Leaders with both task- and relationship-management skills:** Not surprisingly, given the importance of both strong relationships and task clarity in collaborative groups, the leaders of the most successful teams are those who are rated as strong in both areas by their team members. Skillful leaders have the ability to create clear and well-structured environments and the capacity to reinforce the development of networks and social structures. Both orientations have a highly significant correlation to group members' sense of purposeful collaboration.
- **Executives who model collaboration:** Executive role modeling adds important validity to an organization's cooperative values. The behavior of senior executives is vital in the establishment of cooperative norms. One of the most significant correlations with norms of collaboration is the experience of members seeing others (and in particular their senior leaders) working collaboratively with each other.
- **Highly engaged, committed participants:** Collaboration is fundamentally a discretionary activity. It can be catalyzed, but it can't be mandated—and to that extent, it requires a shift in management mindset and the development of a highly engaged workforce. Instead of emphasizing top down measures to require cooperation, corporations will do better to focus on creating an environment in which individuals themselves will choose to behave collaboratively.

While some collaborative initiatives may well succeed with only some of these factors active in the corporate mindset, if the enterprise can provide stakeholders with a culture that embraces and internalizes these factors, collaboration will likely prove to be both spontaneous and fruitful.

CONCLUSION

Collaborative platform success is dependent on user adoption and adoption is based on thoughtful design and forward-thinking enterprise processes. Becoming a collaborative enterprise doesn't happen by chance. Organizations need to understand their cultures and the strategic goals for collaboration, and then engineer both the tools and the adoption strategy. If the collaborative platform is intuitive and versatile, provides clear benefits to the end user (with links to overall business impact), and is attuned to cultural collaborative capacity, employees can focus on achieving results collaboratively.



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