**Social Networking Comes to City Hall**

**How Collaboration Technology is Helping Palo Alto Break Down Silos**

Category: Technology Advancements

City of Palo Alto, CA

Population: 65,554

**Project Leaders:**

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**How Collaboration Technology is Helping Palo Alto Break Down Silos**

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July 31, 2013

**Introduction**

Cities largely follow an organizational chart that divides employees into divisions, departments,

and offices. While this allows organizations to collectively pool expertise and resources to

achieve goals and deliver services, the down side is the silo effect. Silo behavior can have a

detrimental impact on knowledge sharing, performance, efficiency and morale. And in an

economy that has placed ever‐increasing demands on a leaner workforce; maximizing

resources through collaboration can have a tremendous impact on productivity. How can social

networking technologies transform silo‐based thinking into a more symbiotic mindset that

helps maximize the potential of the entire organization?

This case study examines the City of Palo Alto’s experiment with Salesforce Chatter, a social

networking platform, and the lessons learned today about the challenges and opportunities of

employing social networking platforms in a public agency.

**Background**

As of early 2013, there are over a billion active monthly users of Facebook and almost 700

million daily users. People from across the world use this social network to share and exchange

stories, pictures, ideas, and more. These numbers suggest a compelling platform that is

engaging humanity in a manner without precedent. Facebook and its competitors have

convincingly demonstrated that people will share and collaborate with each other, and with

strangers, in an inclusive manner not just for fun, but to make things happen. And yet, when

most of the working population of those users goes to their places of employment, they use

technologies that reinforce barriers to collaboration. Email—albeit an important business

technology—primarily facilitates sequential and non‐inclusive collaboration. Up until recently,

the merits of social networking has had the hardest time successfully penetrating the

enterprise.

The tide is turning. Today, an increasing number of organizations are exploring, experimenting,

and deploying social collaboration tools. They are becoming social enterprises. Why the

change? It may be because of better solutions or more leadership support or greater

recognition of its potential value. Perhaps it is a mix of all these things and more. But without a

doubt, workers rising through the ranks today are more apt to try social networking in the

enterprise. They have already accepted and blended the use of technology in their work and

home lives.

With enterprise collaboration in the private sector just entering the early majority phase of the

technology adoption curve, where does that leave the public sector? As one would imagine,

there are only a few innovative agencies that have taken the leap to build a social enterprise.

Most notably the City of Boston and the State of Colorado have been pushing the envelope.

With the recent deployment of a social collaboration platform citywide, we can now count the

City of Palo Alto as one of those innovators.

**City Manager Creates the Business Case**

In March 2012, at the request of the City Manager James Keene, staff evaluated cutting edge

technologies to allow the City Manager to more easily communicate and engage with all city

staff, and staff to connect more easily with each other, to share ideas and documents, and to

solve problems together. The intended result is to have improved access to timely information

and a platform to solve problems more quickly, and as a result, improve the services provided

to the community.

**The City Begins an Experiment**

After extensive research, in April 2012 the City deployed a limited, short‐term experiment with

Salesforce Chatter among the City’s Information Technology and Administrative Services

Departments, as well as its Executive Leadership Team. Chatter is a cloud‐based social

networking platform that allows users to form a community within their organization that can

be used for collaboration and knowledge sharing. While several solutions met the basic

requirements, Chatter was compelling because it was closely modeled after Facebook. It was

also exceptionally low cost ($1,000 total per year for everyone in the City), and being a

Software‐as‐a‐Service (SaaS) solution, it was easy to deploy.

Initially the City’s goal was to have 50 early adopters in the first three months. Numbers grew

quickly and the City exceeded this goal. However, an early lesson was that users found it to be a

deterrent to have only a few months to try it. It was not seen by some as a worthwhile effort

for the short amount of time it would be available. The experiment was extended through the

fall and in no time at all the City had over 200 users. Most were just viewers, with just a handful

of staff brave enough to post items.

**The Decision to Deploy Citywide**

The City reviewed the metrics in early 2013. While the data was not overwhelmingly

conclusive, it was sufficiently persuasive to make a decision to deploy the platform citywide for

a period of 18 months. On March 1, 2013, almost a year after we started to think about social

collaboration at the City, we invited all staff to participate. So far, we have approximately 340

users on the platform, and we have had lots of curiosity, great questions, and are seeing some

sharing of information, successes, and recognition. The City Manager recognizes staff and

highlights City events. Staff posts pictures and creates work groups. One particular group

encourages staff to eat healthier and to exercise more. Another group shares tips and tricks for

smartphones and tablet computers. While these may not seem to be earth‐shattering

collaborations, they show the promise of collaboration in a manner that previously did not

exist.

Some additional lessons learned in the City’s Chatter experiment is that the leadership in the

organization must lead by example and embrace and use the platform. Users will be drawn to

the platform if the content is relative, useful and important. The platform must also be

intuitive, secure, facilitate sharing of any document type, cloud‐based and accessible via a

browser, iPhone, iPad, android, etc., be a respected and mature platform, and have real utility.

Finally, it’s important to be clear to all users that the while the platform is shared internally

similar to a City’s intranet, that any information that is posted is a public record and subject to

the public records act.

It goes without saying we are also seeing plenty of people who don’t get it and are not shy to

share their view that it doesn’t seem to offer any value. But isn’t that one of the greatest

challenges of innovation? Those of us tasked with anticipating a possible future, even when we

have little idea what that future will bring, must push forward with our ideas despite enormous

pressure from the naysayers and antagonists. If there is success, everyone wins. If there is

failure, we learn something and then we apply those lessons as we move forward with other

innovative experiments.

**Conclusion**

Inherent in its role as a City, Palo Alto believes it has the responsibility and the privilege to be a

role model in how a public agency can use innovative technology to serve its community. And

rather than going down the well‐trodden path; the City continually charts new territory. The

City doesn’t just repeat the work of others; new ideas and innovative solutions to problems are

repeatedly sought. Of course, this strategy has implicit risks and must be applied in a deliberate

and balanced approach to the right, qualifying projects.

In 2004, nobody thought about Facebook. Nobody knew they would want it or even what value

it could have in their lives. Less than 10 years later, Facebook–a social network–is one of the

most remarkable phenomena of our time and a billion people have discovered a new, fun and

productive way to interact together.

Can we do the same at City Hall? It’s early to know if the City is on a course to radically change

the nature of our work through its use of Chatter, but we are doing things differently and

working towards opening minds to a new world and a new way of communicating. In the best

case, we are charting a course that may transform governmental collaboration in the same way

Facebook changed our lives. The worst case, we increase some level of collaboration and

information sharing across departments.