


Jump-Starting Collaboration with Social Search

A WHITEPAPER FROM





Over the past several years, industry pundits and vendors have predicted that collaboration tools such as social tagging, social networking, wikis and other Web 2.0 phenomena will become mainstream within the enterprise. In fact, Gartner reported that by the end of 2007, thirty percent of all large corporations had Web 2.0 applications enabled within their organizations. But as the adoption of Web 2.0 functionality hits the enterprise, a question still remains—how can enterprises effectively integrate these web-based tools into their corporate infrastructure in a way that maximizes employee collaboration?

The answer is through search. Almost all data created by enterprise applications can be crawled by a search engine and accessed via a search box. Many organizations connect all of their applications through a single search screen today. Over the past several years, enterprise search has opened the doors to all content stored throughout the enterprise. The next step is to provide end users with tools to make sense of this overwhelming amount of information and to easily share knowledge with colleagues and business partners. These collaboration tools, which will turn the quest for collaboration into a reality, are now available through new enterprise search capabilities—social search.

Defining Social Search

Social Tagging

The simplest and easiest-to-implement forms of social search are fixed types of social tagging—voting and ratings. This capability allows users to rate or vote on whether they find a search result useful or not. By rating or voting on search results, subsequent searchers will see which results their peers thought most relevant. This information can also be used to adjust relevancy. Administrators can run reports to determine what type of content is found by users to be most helpful and can create key matches based on this information. This continuous feedback loop ultimately improves the end users' ability to find exactly what they need.

Another form of social tagging in search is keyword tagging. This gives users the ability to tag documents based on keyword terms that identify the concepts most important in the document. These keywords then become associated with the document in the search engine as metadata and can be found via search and used to organize search results into categories.

The last and most powerful form of tagging is search results annotation. Annotation lets users comment on search results by using free text similar to how one would comment on a blog post. Workers can read other users' annotations and quickly learn about documents pulled up in search results without ever opening them, saving valuable time in locating information. Additionally, these annotations can even help users learn the context of information as well as which colleagues to turn to for more details.

Annotations offer users an alternative way for colleagues to communicate information to one another versus email or instant messaging, providing the added benefit of never being misplaced, lost or accidentally deleted. Annotations also address the concern many organizations have of losing valuable human knowledge when employees leave or retire. It's an easy way to capture, disperse and use knowledge without fear that it will walk out the door when an employee leaves.

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Social Bookmarking

With social bookmarking, users can save individual search results or entire queries into virtual folders that have read/write protection at the user, group or corporate level. By saving search results in shared virtual folders, others in the organization can easily view results in specific subject areas their colleagues have found useful and utilize the work others have already done for their own searches. This saves users time as well as letting them to tap into the knowledge of others.

Social Networking

Social networking capabilities in search allow users to locate experts within their organization by viewing profiles of colleagues pulled from a variety of different repositories in the form of a mash-up. Search-based mash-ups can display employee photos, contact information, biographical data and recent tagging or annotating activity in one single view. For example, if an employee has tagged dozens of documents with a specific keyword, whenever that keyword is searched on, that employee would show up in the results as a potential expert on that particular subject.

Social Search in Action

The following four scenarios—competitive intelligence, research and development, human resources and a customer call center—are all applications where the introduction of social search capabilities can dramatically increase collaboration, drive innovation, foster communication and improve productivity.

Competitive Intelligence

Competitive intelligence teams within organizations are tasked with keeping up with an endless flow of information regarding markets, technologies and competitors. This information comes in many different forms from a wide variety of sources and outlets—news stories, press releases, subscription-based reports, blog postings, employment advertisements and more. In addition, these teams often have a dual charter to not only make the information above accessible to a broader audience, but to also produce their own intelligence briefs for executive leadership.

Social search provides a ready-made platform to serve as a collaboration vehicle for these market analysts as well as a self-service information portal for the rest of the

organization. The working homepage of the search interface for competitive intelligence workers can include the most recently indexed blog, newswire and reports published on a list of competitors and hot topics. Each analyst can have a set of virtual folders to drop new search results into for current or ongoing projects. Team folders can be set up for multi-analyst collaboration or to disperse information to company executives. General interest information can be placed into company-wide folders.

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Social tagging capabilities give these teams new, faster ways to communicate with one another on time-sensitive projects. For example, when reviewing published reports regarding potential acquisition targets, analysts can provide snapshot summaries by annotating the search result for each report, making the review process by business development much quicker. In addition, each report can be privately tagged with the project code name, making it easy to later find all documents associated with that project.

Research and Development

To thrive in an increasingly competitive environment, R&D must rely on collaboration to drive innovation. Achieving the required level of collaboration can be difficult, though, as researchers are often located across the globe. The technology required to enable true collaboration across all available information sources has not been available—until the advent of social search.

By annotating results from a search query, a researcher in the United States can begin a virtual conversation with a colleague in Germany. That two-way conversation can expand as other workers from around the world add their own commentary. Suddenly a whole new product direction or feature is born—all from a simple search.

Social search can also help organizations leverage their internal social networks by pointing users to experts in their own organizations. By tracking the documents a worker tags or adds comments to, the social search platform can identify subject matter authorities in the field.

Take the example of an engineer working for an automaker. The engineer marks several search results with a “fuel efficiency” tag for easy identification. The search platform records each tag the engineer has made, so when a colleague performs a search for fuel efficiency, the first engineer is identified as a fuel efficiency expert via an enterprise mash-up that displays his profile and contact information.

The searcher can access other files the engineer has tagged or contact the engineer directly. The two can then collaborate either virtually or in real time to add value to their organization.

In both examples, the social search-inspired collaboration and innovation comes not from management or technology, but by an organization’s most valuable resource—its workers.

Human Resources

Search can provide real value in administrative departments, such as human resources, as well.

Regardless of an organization’s size, one of the most grueling tasks for any HR department is sifting through resumes to find the most qualified applicants to fill open positions. Frustration typically exists between recruiters sending resumes for review to business managers, only to hear constant rejection. Recruiters continue their search sifting through new and old resumes, but struggle to remember why candidates have been rejected in the past or to find candidates who meet all requirements of an open position.

An innovative solution to promote collaboration and foster better communication throughout the entire hiring process is to enable users to tag and annotate resumes. As resumes come into HR, recruiters can rate and tag each resume describing key characteristics. Now instead of filing applicants into a single category, a resume can have multiple tags to search against in the future. And as additional recruiters review applicants, they can augment the tags and adjust ratings as needed.

As resumes become ready to share, recruiters can bookmark the resumes within the search interface for review and assign them to the appropriate hiring manager. Hiring managers can then annotate these results, posting questions to ask in follow-up calls or explaining why an applicant has been rejected. The advantage of such collaboration techniques is that all the annotations and tags can be used in the future. The next time a recruiter does a search, they will be able to see hiring manager comments made previously and quickly determine if there is value in sending it out for a different position. A rejected candidate for one position might be appropriate for another with slightly different requirements. Ultimately, this speeds up the hiring process and helps ensure qualified applicants don't get overlooked.

Call Centers

Nowhere is the return on investment for social search more quantifiable than in a call center environment. Here, time really does equal money. The more customers or prospects an individual call center worker can assist, the greater the impact on the organization's bottom line.

With social search's ability to tag and annotate documents, employees can virtually assist coworkers by illustrating which files are the most valuable.

Take the case of a call center for a large automobile insurance company. The center handles incoming calls from across the United States, but no individual employee is an expert in insurance law for each of the 50 states. When a call comes in seeking a quote for insurance for Ohio, the worker is required to search an extensive database of laws, forms and procedures while the prospective customer is on the phone. Such a call can easily take fifteen or more minutes, limiting the number of calls each worker can take—and driving up the insurance company's costs.

But with social search, call center workers can tag documents a phrase such as "Ohio regulations" or highly rate a valuable file to help other agents find what they are looking for faster. Workers can also create virtual folders containing the pertinent information for each state, which can be shared across the department.

Conclusion

By taking the best ideas from Web 2.0 based concepts, such as social tagging, social bookmarking and networking, and marrying them with the power of business search, social search gives enterprises the ability to tap into and make use of the vast amount of human knowledge within their own organizations. As the examples in this paper show, social search provides the means to go beyond just finding information to actually freeing it from the confines of applications, allowing organizations to increase collaboration and accelerate innovation—all while gaining valuable insight into the collective intelligence of the organization.



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