Establish Social and Community Experiences as Essential Digital Workplace Capabilities

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Initiatives: Digital Workplace Strategy

Workstream collaboration tools are the everyday activity hub for remote workers, used not just for tasks but as an imperfect tool for social and community engagement. Digital workplace application leaders must apply these practices to improve social and community experiences in hybrid work.

Overview

Key Findings

■ Most organizations find it difficult to correlate the value of better employee social and community experiences with improved business results, resulting in tactical approaches that fail to include the right stakeholders and reflect workforce-wide requirements.

■ Digital workplace application leaders lack the best practices required to align improved social and community employee experience to technology enablement options, leading to an ad hoc focus on tools rather than a strategic response.

Recommendations

Digital workplace application leaders supporting hybrid work and collaboration strategies must:

■ Assess your organizations’ digital workplace strategy to see if it includes cross-organizational stakeholders, harnesses HR and other analytics, and applies insight from frontline experts to address social and community engagement needs.

■ Identify technology enablement activities within digital workplace and hybrid work projects and how to best use high-visibility “lighthouse projects” to raise awareness and build momentum.
Strategic Planning Assumption

By 2024, 80% of global enterprises will include social and community engagement experiences as essential elements in VoE measures, employee experience design and digital workplace technology enablement.

Introduction

Like many digital workplace application leaders, your focus for the past year has been on remote workers; ensuring they’re productive, collaborative and informed on organizational developments.

The Gartner Digital Worker Experience Survey, 2021 revealed that:

- Sixty-three percent of workers indicate they are working from home more now than they did before the pandemic.
- Half of employees have started to work from home since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The 2020 Gartner Well-Being Employee Survey revealed that:

- Fifty-five percent of employees report feeling more lonely and isolated working from home since the pandemic started leaving many, but not all, longing for the social interaction that was taken for granted before. ²

The digital workplace application focus has been on workstream collaboration and meeting tools. To handle employee experience and culture concerns, these tools have been promoted as ad hoc “water coolers.” Adding brainstorming, whiteboard and visual collaboration tools for better meeting engagement has also been common. But a strategic response remains elusive.

The shift to hybrid work exacerbates the challenge of improving social and community engagement. As portions of the workforce return to a physical workplace, others will remain remote, while some staff will be both in and out of the office. Peer relationships will remain chaotic for some time. Continued ad hoc use of tools simply because they are already available will not deliver the necessary improvements, and could even undermine the employee experience needed for hybrid work to be successful.
Digital workplace application leaders have the opportunity to expand their role by strategically advising business and IT decision makers on how to blend the organizational responses needed. The four practices seen in Figure 1 will enable a sustainable strategy for improving employee social and community engagement:

- Including a cross-organizational set of stakeholders.
- Harness voice of the employee (VoE) and digital workplace application analytics.
- Apply insights from advocates and community leaders that deal directly with employee experience.
- Identify technology-enablement activities and build momentum through lighthouse projects (see Note 1).

Figure 1: Blend Social and Community Engagement Efforts Into Broader Strategies
Gather a Cross-Organizational Set of Stakeholders

Many business initiatives that drive social software and policy decisions, including those focused on employee social interactions and communities, are conducted over a relatively short period of time, and with limited resources. Although it’s common for technology requirements to be summarized, high-level summaries usually fail to accurately represent the diverse needs of business stakeholders across the organization. This unbalanced approach typically splits into two camps:

- Efforts are driven by executives, HR and corporate communications leaders
- Efforts are driven by one or more line-of-business leaders

Favoring expediency over a long-running, sustainable strategy does have its allure. Yet “faster and cheaper” is often offset by the issues summarized in Table 1.
Table 1: Lack of Stakeholder Diversity Skews Project Focus

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Source: Gartner (August 2021)

What are the lessons we need to learn from past mistakes? Successful efforts to improve employee social interaction and community engagement must include a wide range of stakeholders including executives, HR, corporate communications and line-of-business leaders. When projects are driven by a cross-functional team, the total effort can be more effectively tied to a collection of results that benefit the whole organization, which creates a stronger business case.

Actions to take:
Harness VoE and Digital Workplace Analytics to Surface Gaps and Opportunities

In other Gartner research on employee experience improvement (see the linked documents at the end of this research), we focus on HR analytics and components that span work and personal influences. One key aspect of employee experience that is synergistic with efforts to improve social interaction and community engagement revolves around “moments that matter.”

Moments that matter are experiences that are:

- **Emotion generating:** People feel something, whether it is good or bad.
- **Scalable:** You could improve experience for many different people.
- **Frequent:** These moments happen really often. Improving the experience each time makes a difference.

Segment solutions into categories and outline examples of business activities and improved employee experiences:

- Water cooler moments (for ad hoc social interaction)
- Communities of practice (for groups that need to share expertise)
- Employee resource groups (for topics of interest that cut across roles and departments)
- Town halls (for more immersive, large-scale events)
- Meetups (for more serendipitous interactions that mimic physical workplace “bump ins”)
- Ambient video (for causal interactions using real-time presence and immersive UIs)
- Ideation and crowdsourcing (for experiences that are more contestlike)

Collaborate with stakeholders to gain commitment and backing, outlining what their participation and commitment will mean to support the business case. Applying a responsible, accountable, consulted and informed (RACI) methodology here can clarify efforts.
Identifying, understanding and connecting these moments to employee experiences that are peer-to-peer, voluntary and associated with remote and hybrid work can reveal areas that improve social interaction and community engagement. Typically, activities where work and personal lives come together to influence behavior are good candidates to target. Work factors can be directly related to role and performance but also include how the employee identifies with organizational mission and cultural values.

Tapping into those motivations can be augmented by personal factors that encompass the desire for recognition, mentorship, career progression or other status gain. For instance, strategy teams may forecast how social and community experiences are improved during moments when staff come together in purposeful ways. For instance, some digital workplace application tools can build social interactions and community engagement as a side benefit to their work-related uses.

These interactions might include:

- **Business aligned**: This isn't just about making people happy; it's about enabling them to do their best work for the organization.

- **Critical talent aligned**: Improvements will help your most critical talent segments. These employees have a significant impact on the business, and improving their experience will improve business results.

- Q&A tools can expedite delays when staff need expertise from colleagues but the experience also builds community and expands professional networks

- Innovation tools help the organization tap into new products, services or new ways of working but also build community as groups collaborate on those ideas.

- Community and workstream collaboration tools can be used for onboarding processes but the conversational experience can strengthen peer relations via coaching and mentoring.

- Content collaboration tools, such as wikis, enable groups to come together as a community to share their insight and co-create information that reflects their collective expertise.
VoE analytics can identify moments that matter and high-level use cases to jump-start voluntary participation. The kind of data that might assist those efforts can come from many different sources such as surveys, polls, focus groups and contextual inquiries. To fine-tune insights, other data sources can be used, such as those associated with digital workplace applications. For example, in organizations that are committed to Microsoft Office 365, usage data from tools like Microsoft Teams can generate activity reports. Microsoft also offers Viva Insights and Microsoft Productivity Score that add additional analysis of how workers use tools like Teams. ISV partners like Swoop Analytics apply social networking analysis (sometimes referred to as organizational analysis) techniques to reveal additional interaction patterns that infer staff behavior. Data analysis reports provide complementary adoption insights that expose trends and activity patterns potentially revealing opportunities to improve social interaction and community engagement. It should be noted that organizations need to approach deep employee analytics with caution because employees that think they are under surveillance will be skeptical about participating in these efforts.

During early-stage strategy formation, a mix of quantitative and qualitative analytics can buttress the business case needed to rationalize the time, money and resources being expended. Stakeholders should treat the value of these efforts as a continuous process and not a “one off” step to carry out early on. Establishing a standing process that includes decision criteria and review cycles is important to inform stakeholders and all support teams involved in the implementation phase. Insight from this process helps to resequence tasks, alter priorities, adjust deployments and improve change-management efforts.

**Actions to take:**

- Determine the desired types of VoE analytics needed, selecting the right listening techniques, data sources, and measurement methods related to social interaction and community engagement.

- Analyze digital workplace application usage and activity reports, and expand the use of data sources that contain user experience metrics, such as social and organizational network analysis and digital experience monitoring tools.
Apply Insight From Employee Experience Advocates, Community Leaders and First-Line Management

COVID-19 and the global experience with remote working has added additional insights into employee experience that have become more critical to understand as some workers come back into the office (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Trends in Social Interaction and Community Engagement

Encouraging more meaningful peer-to-peer interactions that straddle work and social conversations is on the rise. Such efforts are meant to address fatigue and the sense of being disconnected from colleagues and the organization at large. However, Gartner inquiry trends on topics related to social software and digital workplace applications indicate that efforts are more ad hoc and tactically focused. Promoting tools that improve meeting experiences or spontaneous chats can do little more than triage the issue and may fail to result in sustained success.
Applying insight from employee experience advocates, community leaders and other roles that have experience of dealing with workforce engagement adds vital expertise to the project initiative. Their stories add credible “real life” examples of how improvements can influence hybrid work. Using these tactics ensures social and community engagement align with the objective of creating an employee experience vision. Such objectives often guide business and IT investments as well as calibrate workforce expectations.

Interviews, focus groups or contextual inquiries are all valid methodologies to apply in these circumstances. Participants should have the option to remain anonymous. The information gathered might be contextualized to represent more general use cases than pinpoint reporting that can lead to contributors being identified indirectly. Once gaps, opportunities or “hot spots” are identified, obtaining firsthand accounts of what worked and what failed can provide the kind of context that is not available through any other means.

**Actions to take:**

- Reach out to sources in more formal roles, some of whom may already be a stakeholder such as:
  - CHROs
  - L&D instructors
  - DEI strategists
  - Talent analytics subject matter experts
  - ERG leaders
  - Employee experience design teams
  - Line managers involved in mentoring or coaching roles
Identify Technology Enablement Activities and Build Momentum Through Lighthouse Projects

Once the three practices are contextualized to meet organizational needs, an action plan is necessary to prioritize and sequence projects, funding, resources, timelines and so on. These efforts should include the following activities, the IT and business organizations, and be included within digital workplace programs and hybrid work initiatives.

Steps digital workplace application leaders should take to prepare for selecting the right mix of technologies:

- Ensuring the group charged with technology enablement includes a mix of functional, technical and line-of-business representatives. Actual end-user representatives should be added to any vendor evaluation efforts.

- Conducting a current-state analysis to identify relevant technologies already being used to improve social interactions and community engagement and their success/employee sentiment.

  These should be rerun periodically (every X months) to reassess the current state and adjust accordingly. Changes in personal technology, competitive and business demands, and other considerations may cause sentiment to shift and social interaction needs to evolve over time.

- Linking technology assessments to any broader strategies appropriate to that tool’s category (such as unified communications and collaboration).

- Other candidates to talk to might be in more informal roles, such as:
  - Community managers (see Note 2)
  - Senior staff involved in wellness programs, hackathons or community outreach programs
  - Business technologists involved in working with local staff on technology needs
  - Learning specialists working with staff on digital dexterity topics
  - Employees recognized for peer advocacy roles or other examples of community fellowship

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Linking technology assessments to any broader strategies appropriate to that tool’s category (such as unified communications and collaboration).
Steps application leaders should take to collaborate with business stakeholders:

- Establish desired business outcomes to generate tool selection criteria and ultimately drive RFI/RFP and proof-of-concept scenarios and evaluate vendor demonstrations.

- Establishing metrics that help with project adjustments and iterative improvements.

Steps application leaders should take in preparation for project kickoffs that can include technology evaluations and selection as needed for social and community engagement:

- Forecasting potential new operational roles encouraged by different social and community tools (such as community managers, event coordinators, and content and communication producers).

  - Connect how those roles feed back to those involved in new ways of working, employee experience, hybrid work and digital workplace efforts.

- Brainstorming on ways to best encourage teams to co-create their own social interaction patterns (see Quick Answer: What Team Guidelines Promote Healthy Hybrid Work?)

Steps application leaders should take in preparation for project kickoffs that can include technology evaluations and selection as needed for social and community engagement:

- Identifying initial lighthouse projects that could be effective reference examples for everyone, and act as initial proof-of-concept success stories and lessons learned.

  - Select a lighthouse project that strikes a balance of difficulty, risk and value. Avoid those that are too simplistic and undifferentiated, but also avoid those that could be too complicated and prone to failure.

- These pilot examples will become part of communications, managerial talking points and leadership call-outs to help raise awareness and build momentum.
Outline change management requirements that include:

- Kicking off a communications campaign to inform staff of progress, hurdles and success stories. The communications campaign should also provide clear lines to self-help resources and any surveys or feedback mechanisms put in place.
- Launching a champions network where employees act as mentors and coaches to colleagues.
- Using feedback mechanisms (such as surveys, focus groups and insight from champions) on how to improve social interaction and community engagement efforts.
- Creating talking points for managers on ways to encourage worker adoption.
- Inviting leadership support through town halls and other events where they have the opportunity to broadly endorse the merits of the strategy at a business and cultural level.
- Taking advantage of broader organizational and cultural change practices by adapting relevant methods from Gartner’s ESCAPE framework (see Use the ESCAPE Model to Develop Change Leadership).

Evidence

Top 7 Insights From the 2021 Digital Worker Experience Survey

Gartner Well-Being Employee Survey, 2020

Gartner Digital Worker Experience Survey, 2021

Gartner’s 2021 Digital Worker Experience Survey was conducted online during November and December 2020 among 10,080 respondents from the U.S., Europe and APAC.

Participants were screened for full-time employment, in organizations with 100 or more employees and required to use digital technology for work purposes.

Ages range from 18 through 74 years old, with quotas and weighting applied for age, gender, region and income, so that results are representative of working country populations.
**Note 1: Definition of a Lighthouse Project**

A "lighthouse" project is one that stands out so that everyone can see it. Such projects can be used to illustrate how digital workplace applications can provide concrete value. Ensure that colleagues hear what benefits the employees saw, how the new capabilities helped, and how other people can take advantage of these capabilities. Word of mouth will spread the feedback to some extent, but publishing stories in newsletters, on an intranet, in recorded videos or in an on-demand webinar will increase the reach of these anecdotes.

Using the case-based lighthouse project approach has the following advantages:

- **Focusing on a few specific use cases, rather than trying to drive universal adoption, makes those activities more likely to succeed.** It is far better to have several examples that prove the value of the new ways of working in a specific context before attempting to scale the enablement projects to everyone in the organization. In the early stages, a few big and highly visible successes are more useful than 100 people who have tried the tools but are not using them effectively.

- **Stories from colleagues have much more credibility than from the IT department or product vendors.** Employees are best able to define how new tools can support their daily activities. Combining the process knowledge of line-of-business colleagues with the tool knowledge of IT staff can produce the best results. Employees are used to hearing how great technology is, but are likely to have been disappointed in the past. Testimonials from colleagues whom they know will carry much more weight.

- **Addressing business outcomes is the best way to teach new employees about the products.** Once these lighthouse projects get going, others will see them and learn how they can apply them in their work as well. When demonstrating how they achieved benefits, they will be demonstrating the underlying tools as well. Employees will learn about the products without realizing it.
Note 2: Community Managers

Community managers are being recognized for their duties with formal titles and roles being defined. They are often responsible for a range of activities that include:

- Performing organizational tasks and deliverables (sponsorship, charter, goals, metrics and value assessment).
- Acting as a liaison to stakeholders and other advocates as part of community relations.
- Engaging in recruitment and outreach efforts (such as internal marketing and sponsor-related events).
- Managing ongoing governance, brokering issues and disputes, and coordinating meetings.
- Ensuring a valuable community member experience.

Recommended by the Authors

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

How to Harness Voice of the Employee Insights for Continuous Employee Experience Improvement

How to Keep Remote Employees Connected in the Hybrid Organization

3 Hybrid Work Challenges Driving Employee Fatigue

Ignition Guide to Creating an Employee Experience Vision

How General Managers Can Reenergize Their Teams in 2021

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Expert Insight Video: 3 Obstacles to Creating a Successful Digital Workplace
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