



## Work Management 2.0

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**E**volution progresses in steps, not a smooth line. Propelled by technology advances and the social network phenomenon, we are approaching a step in the evolution of work practices rivaling the advent of e-mail 30 years ago. This article introduces some of the key themes at stake and provides perspectives to foster an understanding of what is coming. It is also a call to action for HR professionals to become leaders, or at least influencers, in shaping the future of how work gets done.

### Changing the Way We Work

We are at a pivot point in the way we work together. Similar to the evolution wrought by e-mail, new technologies are affecting how work gets done at a granular, person-to-person level. New work norms are emerging that will change how we relate and “speak” to each other. This has everything to do with execution.

All collaborative work gets done through dialogs, someone asking someone else to do something. The frequency and quality of these dialogs around accomplishing tasks and goals is boosted or constrained by all the “soft stuff” – trust, openness, accountability, values, organizational culture, etc.

This is the real front line of employee engagement. Ultimately, the whole organization’s success is at stake. Like cells in our bodies, the health of these interactions – transfers of information and energy between people working

*All collaborative work gets done through dialogs.*

together – determines the strength and viability of the whole organism.

The “soft stuff” is precisely HR’s domain of expertise. Human Resources should play an active role in selecting, influencing, implementing, and supporting the technology of person-to-person interactions that will power the enterprise forward.

These new technologies enable the HR purview to finally move beyond workforce management into work management; beyond the HR organization and into the business of influencing how non-HR users across the enterprise engage with their peers and managers to get work done; beyond support to a truly strategic role. Imagine harnessing new collaboration and relationship-building technologies to guide work-related practices, enable oversight of execution in progress, and provide detailed real-time personal feedback that actually helps people do their jobs better. These changes are occurring; HR should be playing a leading role.

### Technology Enables and Constrains

Technology is never neutral; it is a third-party work aid with a particular point of view. Required inputs, interaction supports, and resulting outputs all reflect some underlying philosophy.

Certain technologies promote:

- Wanton personal information sharing with an ever-growing “friends” circle,
- Sound bites that report our every move,
- Goal setting and positive reinforcement from peers, or
- A disciplined communication pattern around getting “stuff” done.

Each has value. Each has limits. And each raises concerns that HR professionals can illuminate and address as implementation choices are being made.

### “Social Me This” – Two Paradigms

The word *social* is overused today.

Being social is simply the opposite of being in isolation. Workplaces, teams, media and business-personal networks were social long before the word became vogue. What is different is that “technology” has enabled and promoted the belief that there are benefits to being connected more and more frequently with a larger community of contacts than before. In the pre-Internet era, it was acceptable to have a Rolodex of 50 contacts whom we touched base with monthly; now we have LinkedIn, etc., with 500-plus contacts who get updates daily. Facebook enables us to keep our entire list of Christmas card recipients up-to-date throughout the year (even hourly).

Most social technologies support the one-to-many paradigm – broadcasting information out to everyone in a group. All group members receive every transmission, interaction and contribution from each member. The underlying philosophical value statement is this: “I can get help, resources, advice, etc., by sharing my needs and abilities with a broader and broader community.” The idea certainly has merit, but there are also reasonable limits.



How many channels do I really need to be on? Except for those using social media to market their services, what is the real value of having 500 personal contacts, many of whom you have never

actually spoken with? What is the cost in time of your flow of tweets and keeping up with those of all the others you follow?

Many software vendors offer solutions deploying a one-to-many paradigm. The headlines promise to harness the power of networks of people. Within this scenario:

- Project team members share their personal goals with the whole team.
- Individuals send out queries company-wide seeking help.
- Shared document edits are seen by everyone.
- In an open feedback forum, coworkers award badges to each other.

While the benefits can be appreciated, there are also limitations to these practices:

- Participation can be spotty. Certain people contribute a lot (sometimes too much); others do not contribute.
- Kudos are happily awarded; critiques are never entered.
- Too much sharing challenges a healthy respect for privacy and appropriate confidentiality.
- Groups tend to diffuse responsibility; information sharing is different from accountability.

Broadcasting needs and gathering input from a large social group has value, but social networks do a poor job coordinating work and actually taking action. Lastly, due to its more random nature, there is little hard data from which to evaluate trends or suggest interventions.

An alternate social technology supports the one-to-one paradigm – two specific people having a focused interaction. This dialog can be either private (visible only to the two parties) or open (visible to a broader group of interested parties). The key principle here is the authenticity and personal integrity of the two parties. This emphasis is less freewheeling than the one-to-many paradigm, but this more disciplined approach drives more intimacy and personal accountability.

Several new software vendors are promoting the one-to-one paradigm, espousing the position that the key lever for taking action is the dialog between a requester, i.e., manager, team leader or customer, and the person

performing the request. The application enforces a disciplined dialog, making commitments explicit and tracking each deliverable. Accountability and engagement are made palpable, and these tools provide a wealth of actionable data. On the other hand, these approaches also have limitations insofar as they challenge long-standing work norms and corporate cultures.

Fortunately, the one-to-many and one-to-one paradigms are not antithetical. Optimum implementations will include a blend of each. Human Resources practitioners should be looking deeply into the underlying philosophy these new technologies promote, as well as the behaviors and practices the systems evoke from users.

## A Look at the Post-Privacy World

The separation between our public and private lives is rapidly evaporating. A report on the Internet describes a woman who tweeted her mammogram and cancer diagnosis, then blogged about it, and then crowd-sourced opening up her own MRI data. There are benefits with this behavior, but concerns as well. Extremists suggest Facebook is “destroying the concept of personal privacy on an industrial scale.” The threshold for determining what is public or private is also changing in the workplace. Without being considered Luddite, there is a place for appropriate workplace privacy and confidentiality. Human Resources needs to be at the forefront of this discussion. It’s not about the risk of hackers getting into an account; it’s about what is the new appropriate content and tone for sharing within the open forum.

## Trust and Transparency

Lowering privacy thresholds is also tending to increase transparency at work. The new technologies enable workers to share their tasks and goals with teammates. The most advanced new applications have the capability to illuminate an enterprise’s entire network of cascading, interrelated work activities. By deconstructing, it can be seen that all initiatives result from a network of requester-to-performer conversations. Multiplied many times over, the quality of these conversations obviously determines the enterprise’s success.

We know intuitively that these conversations are taking place, but for the first time, new technologies enable users to see these in-progress conversations, evaluate their health and intervene as appropriate. This represents an entirely new lens for viewing execution in progress.

*Envision your CEO being able to see the entire network of work-related conversations in progress, plus work already completed, arrayed across the key goals he or she has established for the year.*

This new transparency reveals insights relating to productivity, resource constraints, and patterns of performance at the individual and organizational level that were simply not previously available.

Exposing work activity to this extent, however, requires an entirely new level of trust up and down the organization's hierarchy. Employees would need to have enough trust to reveal the details of their work accomplishments and relationships to their colleagues, their manager and their executive management. Managers and executives would need to be willing to allow their staff to see the health of their upper-level commitments. The opportunities to dramatically improve performance for the enterprise by revealing the network of work requests to all parties are huge, but most organizations will move slowly to capture them. Human Resources needs to be a leader in promoting an ever-increasing culture of trust.

## Changing Views on Accountability

Accountability: everyone wants more of it, from our political leaders, institutions, businesses, schools, work colleagues and even our family. Our general understanding of the word, however, and how to acquire more is imprecise and shallow. This is particularly disappointing in the work context because increased accountability equals improved performance.

The word's common usage emphasizes a backward-looking perspective: holding someone accountable for something he or she did, often with a punitive overtone. It comes down to tracking deliveries and due dates with the question: "Did you do it, and if not, what are you going to do about it?" This view is counterproductive to building more workplace accountability. The underlying enforcement and punitive notions about accountability do not create the optimum mood with a prospective collaborator. There needs to be a new perspective about accountability based on four principles:

- 1) Accountability is forward-looking.** *Accountability is agreed upon up-front, not assigned at the end.* During the planning stage, the parties agree on who will be accountable for each deliverable. The performer consciously and explicitly commits and accepts responsibility. The critical portion of the conversation is at the beginning where the commitment is formed. Simply doling out tasks does not clarify accountability.
- 2) Accountability is based on willingness.** *There is a critical distinction between being obliged and being willing to accept responsibility.* In an enterprise characterized by a command-and-control culture, the performer is obliged to accept responsibility for delivering a successful outcome. Accountability is foisted on the performer by virtue of his/her position. In effect, a manager mandates, "I'm holding you accountable..." This does not boost accountability; real accountability comes from the performer's mouth. A performer willing to accept responsibility explicitly declares his/her commitment saying in effect, "You can count on me."

- 3) Accountability is about the quality of the dialog.** *Effective dialog begins with a clear request and ends with an explicit response from the performer.* A conversation ensues and is completed with an agreed upon, crafted commitment and due date with associated deliverable(s). Having responded directly to the request and committed to the deliverable, the performer has taken on full accountability. The interaction between the parties is more important than recording an assigned due date.

- 4) Accountability involves negotiation.** *The requester acknowledges his/her dependency on the performer by providing an opportunity for an honest response.* The performer responds by truthfully sharing his/her capabilities and concerns regarding the request. Commitments with accountability involve a level of disclosure and dialog not typically present when tasks are simply assigned. Most managers assign tasks, expecting accountability to be integral to the assignment; in essence stating, "This task and associated on-time deliverables are your responsibility!" This is not a dialog. The performer has not answered, taking neither personal, nor public task ownership. In order to accept accountability, the performer must be afforded the opportunity to modify, or even to decline, the request. Negotiation strengthens commitment.

Focusing on accountability is an effective lever for improving an enterprise's performance. Accountability drives execution. To be most effective, however, the current enforcement and punitive notions regarding the word need to be replaced with a new perspective that keys on up-front dialog and clearly made agreements.

## Increasing Employee Engagement

Employee engagement matters and has an extremely positive effect on ROI and an enterprise's success. At its core, this is about whether employees have the will to contribute. There are divergent views about how to improve engagement, and there is more to it than setting goals and awarding badges.

Real engagement is driven by four questions regarding an individual's job: Is the work interesting? Do I have some measure of control over my work? Do I have opportunities to learn and grow? Am I getting positive feedback and encouragement? These characteristics are particularly important to the Generation Y'ers and Millennials. Cultures that continue to rely on a management command-and-control philosophy will find it more and more difficult to thrive. Assigning drive-by tasks will no longer suffice; employees expect a voice in what they agree to perform. Therefore, managers need to develop new behaviors around making requests. Employees need to be



encouraged and supported in new behaviors around negotiating counteroffers and making real commitments. Feedback needs to be more frequent and more granular. Each deliverable is an opportunity for documented feedback and recognition. The new technologies reinforce these management and employee behaviors.

## New Work Norms Needed

When examined closely, one can see that our current work norms are seriously flawed. Examples include:

- Task requests are often vague or poorly formed.
- Initiatives brought up in meetings are not followed up because no clear owner or performer has been designated.
- Real commitments to deliver on a certain date are absent as each party prefers to keep things fluid.
- Employees work in an “I’m doing my best” paradigm where managers do not press and employees do not offer explicit commitments.
- Requests from co-workers get lost in inboxes or are never responded to.
- Employees are assigned too frequent high-priority tasks while others languish on an ever-growing to-do list.
- We make requests and then lose track.
- Partial deliveries are “slid in,” while managers do not formally accept and assess the deliverable.
- Setting priorities is used as a surrogate for meeting an agreed upon due date.
- Once completed, the task falls off the Gantt chart without any memory of what transpired or the final outcome.

Managers and employees collude to perpetuate these norms, but they no longer serve us well. These work norms have real hidden inefficiencies and costs keeping everyone from optimally performing. Because everyone recognizes and understands these realities, every request results in a large amount of follow-up. People rarely trust others to get things done; so systems, corporate practices, and individual assignments are established to check up and report back. Due to continued poor execution, project failure rates remain high.

All enterprises are afflicted to some degree with the costs and inefficiencies of these work norms. New practices and behaviors are needed to achieve clearer accountability, better visibility into execution, increased employee engagement and more trust. Changing norms will be the organization’s biggest challenge, but only HR has the purview and expertise to drive cultural change at this level. If HR does not lead, increase awareness, and promote change, then no one does.

## Will HR Lead or Follow?

Technology advances are enabling a fundamental shift in how work gets done that may be as significant as the arrival of the electronic office 30 years ago. Evolutionary

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leaps are beginning to affect the enterprise’s culture at the cellular level, actually guiding how employees interrelate and communicate. Focus is moving from managing the workforce as a whole to managing work, how people actually get “stuff” done and how they execute.

Huge opportunities are unfolding in this space. Human Resources is the only corporate function with the total corporate overview and the appropriate domain expertise to intervene.

But, here’s the thing, new technologies are coming along with or without us.

Business line managers are already selecting new tools that they expect will advance productivity, improve collaboration and boost employee engagement. These technology choices promote and limit a certain set of behaviors and practices that may or may not promote the goals around accountability, privacy, trust, transparency, engagement and work norms. Furthermore, as each separate department selects its own work management technology, all opportunities for corporate-wide metrics and analysis are curtailed.

Human Resources has a narrowing opportunity window to lead or influence the evolution shaping work management for the foreseeable future. It’s happening. The question is will it happen with or without us?

## About the Author



David Arella is CEO and founder of 4Spires, a leading provider of next-generation work management solutions. He has been pioneering advances in HR technology solutions for more than 25 years. While managing HR information systems at Apple Computer during the late 1980’s, his team developed the first-ever “self-service” technologies that enabled employees and managers to interact directly with personnel data. After eight years at Apple, he founded NOAH Software, where for 10 years his company designed, developed, and deployed the first generation solutions for online compensation planning, electronic personnel change forms, résumé capture-search-retrieval systems, employee knowledge-base systems, organization charting, employee service centers, benefits enrollment, employee training administration, and executive reporting. NOAH was acquired by Workscape in 1999, whereupon Mr. Arella became Workscape’s senior vice president in charge of its workforce management product line. In 2007, Mr. Arella founded 4Spires and continues to develop cutting edge talent management solutions. He can be reached at [arella@4spires.com](mailto:arella@4spires.com).