CHANGING THE WAY WE WORK

Visioning Next Generation Work Practices

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Commitments to Execution,
One Conversation at a Time

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Propelled by technology advances and the social network phenomenon, companies are approaching a step-up in the evolution of work practices rivaling the advent of email 30 years ago.

This first of three white papers examines how new collaboration technology relates to the underlying soft issues that determine organization effectiveness - accountability, engagement, and trust. This paper discusses a new approach to accountability with a special emphasis on the role and impact of new social technologies.

Changing the Way We Work

Companies are at a transition point in the way managers and employees work together.

Similar to the evolution wrought by email, new technologies are affecting how work gets done at a very granular, person-to-person level. New work norms are emerging that are altering how individuals and groups relate, what each person expects from the other and their organization, and even how we interact and collaborate with each other. This impacts the execution and commitment each party makes to every activity.

All collaborative work gets done through dialogs, someone asking someone else to perform a task. The frequency and quality of these dialogs around accomplishing tasks and goals will be boosted or constrained by all the "soft stuff" - trust, engagement, accountability, values, organization culture, etc. Ultimately the whole organization's success is at stake. Like cells in our bodies, the health of these interactions - the transfers of information and energy between people working together - determines the strength and viability of the whole organism.

Just as email changed the nature and quality of working relationships three decades ago, today's technologies are enabling similar advancements. Modern workers have different expectations than previous generations about work relationships. New work norms are emerging that will define how well organizations execute.

New Work Norms Needed

When examined closely, it is apparent that current work norms are seriously flawed. Examples include:

• Task requests are often vague or poorly formed, leading to results that neither party find acceptable

• Initiatives discussed in meetings are not followed-up because no clear performer has been designated

• Real commitments to deliver on a certain date are absent, each party prefers to keep things fluid

• Requests from co-workers get lost in inboxes or are ignored

• Employees are assigned too many high priority tasks while other tasks languish on an ever-growing to-do list

• Partial deliveries—stopgap measures are "slid in", managers do not formally accept and assess the deliverable

• Setting priorities is used as a surrogate for making a commitment to meet an agreed due date

• Once completed, tasks falls off the Gantt chart, no outcome documentation

Managers and employees often collude to perpetuate these norms, but they no longer serve anyone well. The norms have real hidden inefficiencies and costs and keep your company from optimally performing. Because everyone recognizes and understands these realities, every request results in an inordinate amount of follow-up.

People have low trust in others to get things done, so systems, review meetings, and other corporate practices 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 from these work norms. New practices and behaviors are needed to achieve clearer accountability, better visibility into execution, increased employee engagement, and more trust. Changing organization norms is a big challenge; new technologies can help.

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 circle of friends

- Sound bites that report our every move

- Goal setting and positive reinforcement from peers

- A disciplined communication pattern around getting stuff done that produces a desired result

Each has value and limits that should be considered as implementation choices are being made

Enterprise Social Technologies - Two Divergent Paradigms

Most social technologies support the one-to-many paradigm - broadcasting information to all group members. Everyone receives each transmission, interaction, and contribution. The underlying philosophical value statement is: "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 you 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 much different than 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.

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 followers. 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.

While recognizing 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 technology enforces a disciplined dialog that makes commitments explicit and tracks each deliverable. Accountability and engagement are made palpable. This approach, however, also challenges long-standing work norms and corporate cultures. A radical new approach to accountability is required.

Trust and Transparency

When managers and employees lower their privacy thresholds this increases workplace transparency. 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.

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

Envision your CEO—management team being able to see the entire network of work-related conversations in progress, plus work completed, arrayed across the key goals they have 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 a new level of trust throughout the organization's hierarchy.

Employees would need to have enough trust to reveal their work accomplishments and relationships to 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 for the enterprise to dramatically improve performance by revealing the network of work requests to all parties are huge, but most organizations will move slowly to capture these until a culture of trust is developed.

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 = improved performance.

The word's common usage emphasizes a backward-looking perspective: holding someone accountable for something they 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 upfront not assigned at the end.* During the planning stage, each party agrees on who will be accountable for each deliverable. The performer 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 their 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 their 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 deliverables. Having responded directly to the request and committed to the deliverable, the performer has taken on full accountability.

4. **Accountability involves negotiation.** *The requester acknowledges their dependency on the performer by providing an opportunity for an honest response.* The performer responds by truthfully sharing their 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 upfront dialog and clearly made agreements.

This new approach to achieving accountability is particularly important to the GenYers and Millenials. Cultures that continue to rely on a 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. New technologies can reinforce these management and employee behaviors.

Conclusion

Current technology advances are enabling a fundamental shift in how works gets done that may be as significant as the arrival of the electronic office a generation ago. Evolutionary 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 and how effectively and efficiently people complete projects and tasks. New tools can improve collaboration and promote a new set of behaviors and practices that can boost accountability, trust, transparency, and engagement. Huge opportunities are unfolding for those who can correctly harness the power of new technologies.

To Learn More

For more information about developing a successful approach to next-generation work practices, contact 4Spires to speak with one of our experts. We have deep expertise in workflow management and understand how to attain these benefits while minimizing the risks and we'd welcome the opportunity to share them with you. Our CommitKeeper software is an online tool founded on these principles. Our team looks forward to talking with you about what can be done to improve execution across your organization.