

How Online Social Networks Benefit Organizations By Lisa Kimball and Howard Rheingold

In order to develop a strategy for its future, an \$8-billion energy company needed to identify the forces that would influence its industry. Previously, the company had used outside consultants to conduct a scenario building process with the top 15 corporate officers. Results were disappointing - final reports sat on the shelf. To make a real difference this time, the process had to go deeper and involve more people across the company to get grass-roots buy-in for recommended changes.

It wasn't feasible to convene an all-hands meeting, and the company was in a hurry. So they opened an online network to connect people at all levels and from all parts of the company in a discussion about the business environment, economic trends, and technology developments that could affect their ability to succeed. In addition to the expected benefits of generating an abundance of ideas and engaging a broad range of people in the company in the strategic planning process, the online network had a profound effect on the organization. During the course of the project, a major crisis occurred when there was a break in the pipeline. Activity online immediately jumped to an intense level as people logged in to find out what was happening and contribute ideas. People felt involved and that they were better able to cope with the crisis because they had timely and accurate information about what was happening. It changed the nature of the organizational conversation almost immediately. As one participant put it, "For the first time I know what's in the minds of my colleagues on a day-to-day basis."

Online social networks are webs of relationships that grow from computer-mediated discussions. The webs grow from conversations among people who share a common affinity (e.g., they work for the same company, department, or in the same discipline) and who differ in other ways (e.g., they are in different locations, keep different hours, specialize in different disciplines, work for different companies). When the people are distributed across time and space, then these conversations need to take place online, over an intranet or private internet forum.

Within a company, a well-tuned online social network can enhance the company's collective knowledge and sharpen its ability to act on what people know in time to be effective. We have long recognized that this kind of network is critical to an organization. Creating these opportunities to connect is often the stated or unstated purpose of facilitated off-site meetings and other communication initiatives. However, the half-life of connections made at these meetings was very short until online technology provided us with a means to support the network over time.

Social networks grow from the personal interactions of human beings over time, as well as from the technological infrastructure that connects those humans.

This means that growing a successful online social network requires social know-how as well as technical expertise. Interactions include those that take place face-to-face, via telephone, online, and even via things we send each other in the postal mail.

Thoughtfully planned and knowledgeably implemented online social networks can enable an organization to:

1. Create an early warning system.
2. Make sure knowledge gets to people who can act on it in time.
3. Connect people and build relationships across boundaries of geography or discipline.
4. Provide an ongoing context for knowledge exchange that can be far more effective than memoranda.
5. Attune everyone in the organization to each other's needs more people will know who knows who knows what, and will know it faster.
6. Multiply intellectual capital by the power of social capital, reducing social friction and encouraging social cohesion.
7. Create an ongoing, shared social space for people who are geographically dispersed.
8. Amplify innovation when groups get turned on by what they can do online, they go beyond problem-solving and start inventing together.
9. Create a community memory for group deliberation and brainstorming that stimulates the capture of ideas and facilitates finding information when it is needed.
10. Improve the way individuals think collectively moving from knowledge-sharing to collective knowing.
11. Turn training into a continuous process, not divorced from normal business processes.
12. Attract and retain the best employees by providing access to social capital that is only available within the organization.

Online Social Networks As Early Warning Systems

The explosive multiplication of an individual's ability to find answers to questions

is one of the most powerful benefits of an online social network. Search engines find facts. People provide solutions to problems. Networks of people can solve problems for each other. Online networks accelerate and globalize the process. Each person in a network knows more than anybody else in the network about at least one special interest and can provide useful knowledge when questions arise concerning their area of expertise. No person is an expert on everything, so we must rely on the expertise of others. But getting the right answer in time isn't easy. First, you need to know "who knows who knows what" in order to ask the question. Second, you need a reason for the people who know the answer to share it with you. When your network includes hundreds of people who have a productive relationship with the online social network you share and feel favorably inclined to answer questions within the network, your ability to get questions answered quickly multiplies exponentially.

Answering questions is powerful, but reactive to problems rather than proactive toward future learning. Far more powerful is active information seeking by individuals on behalf of others in the network. When all the people in such a network actively scan their personal information-streams for early indicators, and feed their findings into the community memory, it makes it possible for every person in the network to know much earlier about blips out on the horizon, events far from their specialty that could have immense impact on the entire organization in the future. Most people engage in this activity in an informal, disorganized way we send URLs and snippets of information to people we know who are likely to benefit from them.

A company that has a good early warning system won't miss opportunities or fail to meet challenges quickly enough. Clueless organizations in many industries were surprised when PCs turned out to be a big thing, because they had no way of absorbing that knowledge systemically, through their own employees. Even though some people inside of the organization undoubtedly knew the shape of the future and were talking about it, they had no way to get it to decision-makers.

An online social network and knowledge community can strengthen an organization's ability to understand the ways in which different parts of the system interact, so that somebody doesn't, for example, make an engineering decision without being aware of the financial impact or marketing doesn't know that it will take longer for a product to move through the pipeline than originally planned. Online social networks alert people to the things that collide when someone's got a good idea but doesn't know what's going on elsewhere, or how their idea affects other's plans or resources.

When individuals (or groups) in the organization notice changes emerging in the work they have been doing, it's critical to make this "intelligence" available to the organization as a whole.

For an early warning system to be effective, communication must be timely.

Waiting for the next face-to-face meeting may be too late - opportunities are lost, problems get worse. Communication also needs to be "Push" v. "Pull" to make sure that nobody misses a key indicator. It's not enough to simply place information in some kind of archive and hope everyone who needs it will find it. Instead, organizations need a means to convene people across the organization and get information and ideas about key trends in front of them.

The danger for distributed organizations is that a weak communications strategy results in missed signals where something new happening in one place could be a bell weather for something that will sooner or later have an effect on other parts of the system. An organization that doesn't share this kind of intelligence is less than the sum of its parts.

The organization needs a strategy for scanning and scouting the environment within which they are operating. It needs a strategy for noticing pattern changes to make sure that important things get up on the organization's radar screen soon enough to make a difference. But it is not enough to simply report the information, it's critical that all groups and stakeholders have an opportunity to discuss its meaning.

Online Social Networks Get Knowledge to People in Time

A large teachers organization was a leader in developing and promoting new standards for teaching math at all levels. But they knew that getting teachers to adopt the significantly new ways of teaching required wouldn't happen just because the standards were published. Summer institutes and other training programs could only reach a small number of the tens of thousands of math teachers in the U.S. The organization partnered with public television in an initiative to produce and distribute a set of videos that showed real teachers in real classrooms using the new ideas. According to Donald S, an author in the field, professionals learn best when they have the opportunity to apply knowledge, reflect on their experience, and get feedback from peers and mentors. But a teacher's schedule doesn't provide any time for conversations with peers during the day and they don't have a lot of energy for meetings at the end of the day. So the set of videos created an online social network of learning communities of 25-30 teachers with a peer facilitator who watched the videos, tried ideas in their classrooms, and got online to talk about their experience.

Having the online space made it possible for teachers to share experiences with each other, about which new approaches were working, which were not working, and how they felt personally and professionally about the changes. Great ideas that were working in a fifth grade classroom in Texas could be used by a teacher in Illinois. As one math supervisor said, "Simply accessing information about different lesson plans and new techniques would not have been nearly as useful as hearing from a fellow teacher about something that really worked with real kids. That's where the rubber meets the road. That's what makes a teacher

willing to try something new. "

One person may know something that many other people need to know, and in the course of events, maybe only that person knows it, unless they participate in communication activities that cuts across time and space and departmental boundaries. It's not just a matter of locating and transferring the specific knowledge, it's more a matter of setting up the kind of nervous system that can survive and thrive in an atmosphere where you are changing your business practices regularly. You must build in ways to encourage and stimulate people who know what's going on to diffuse that knowledge through the organization.

Well-designed online social networks provide a vital context to knowledge exchange that can make the exchange more potent and widespread than a traditional memorandum. It's not just that you've put the word out, "Now we're going to sell men's suits," so now everybody knows what to do. Much more ambient knowledge needs to provide the context to help people perceive the trim-tabling or shifting that's going on in the organization and make all those micro-adjustments in what they're doing in order to stay aligned. They need their antennae out in different parts of the organization, and they need ways to attune other parts of the organization to their own needs and capabilities.

You don't confine exchange of useful knowledge to a meeting or a chance encounter in the hallway. You create a place where, when you see something in the world that's useful because it relates to a conversation you know is taking place in your online social network, you don't have to wait until the meeting on Tuesday, or you didn't miss it because the meeting was last Friday, there's a well-known place to put that information. You multiply the amount of useful knowledge that's exchanged by not confining it to a synchronous meeting. You also make explicit and available the kind of lore about how things are done that's always hidden in pockets of places and usually shared only with people who know exactly who to ask. Useful specific knowledge is available to 90% of an organization, rather than 1%.

Online Social Networks Connect People Across Boundaries

For most global corporations, establishing effective avenues for improving collaboration across the enterprise is strategic. Fred S, Director of Learning and Knowledge Management at a major computer company felt that finding effective ways to share knowledge throughout the organization was key to the company's ability to develop and unify common business unit strategies. The company had many powerful tools that were very effective in supporting teams and workgroups and for collecting and storing information that could be accessed company-wide. But creating an online social network within which to convene managers for conversations and knowledge exchange added something valuable to the mix. The online social network provided a venue for storytelling, showcasing projects and best practices that could be leveraged to create new knowledge resources.

More importantly, the opportunity to meet others working on similar issues creates relationships that can shortcut the important process of figuring out where to go in the organization when you need help on a particular problem. According to one participant, " We need to share knowledge between divisions within our group, and across [company] divisions on how our processes and products relate. As the Reengineering Leader, I am someone who needs to figure out how we can effectively deploy Knowledge Management methodologies, processes, and supporting tools to our group in this context -- this seems to fit right in to tying us all together."

People who should be talking to each other because their interests intersect often don't communicate because they are in different parts of the world, different floors, or different departments. Online discourse structures discussion according to interests and affinities. Engineers around the world can share lore, or people from engineering, marketing, and design can try to get their arms around a project they are all approaching from different directions.

Asynchronous conversations cross communication boundaries of other kinds. The quiet people who might never have something to contribute in a face to face meeting, given time to compose their thoughts, with nobody watching them while they do it, can influence discussions they might not have joined before. A global pharmaceutical company identified high potential managers in different regions as an advisory group for top management. Their periodic face-to-face meetings were interesting and enjoyable but they felt that somehow the group should be able to have a bigger impact. When the group was convened as part of an online social network, they were struck by the potential value of being connected continuously rather just for a few hours every few months. But, perhaps more importantly, they "discovered" one of their members in a new way. Because English was not his first language, he spoke with an accent, and had a very soft voice he had not been a very active participant in face-to-face meetings and people didn't have much of a sense of his experience and ideas. Online, his contributions were brilliant and his peers were very excited about the new ideas and insights he brought to the table. One of his colleagues said, "Now that I have gotten to know him online, I am very motivated to take the time and make the effort to HEAR him in our face-to-face meetings."

Provide an Ongoing Context for Knowledge Exchange

Effectiveness of knowledge is multiplied if it's in the form of a conversation where people can educate each other. If you think that everybody's got a leg of the elephant, you're never going to collectively construct the elephant by sending each other memos about the part you have. You need to have an interactive discussion that helps you adjust how you describe your point of view to another person, based on what you learn about their point of view by communicating with them formally and informally over time. Just putting it in a memo misses the

opportunity for the kind of misunderstandings and readjustments that take place in conversations.

There's also the knowledge problem in organizations that's been described (<http://www.spcomm.uiuc.edu/iknow/>) as "who knows who knows what?" When people have regular conversations about not only direct work-related problems, but also about more general discussions of the direction of the industry or the direction of the company, and other things which may otherwise seem to be totally off the topic, they co-create an atmosphere in which people are more likely to remember things that they want to share with other people.

A large New York university includes more than twenty colleges spread out over all five boroughs from Brooklyn to Staten Island. It can take hours to go from one campus to another. Like many of the key executive groups, the Council of Personal Officers meets monthly, usually at the university headquarters on the Upper East Side. Monthly meetings consist mainly of reports on various administrative and legal matters followed by lunch and informal networking. Sometimes, there is also an afternoon program to provide opportunities for learning. Although every member of this group has a wealth of experience that bears on the issues and challenges they all face in common, the University Personnel Director was frustrated that there never seemed to be enough time for sharing the successes and failures that could help them learn. He was concerned that they weren't able to really connect at the regular meetings and the distance between colleges made it impractical to create informal opportunities for getting together and doing the things needed to build stronger relationships.

This group wasn't ready to give up its regular monthly face-to-face meetings but they were willing to try adding something new to their process. They decided to create a temporary online social network to provide a different way to connect with each other between their meetings. An online environment was created that provided space for focused discussions on some important issues that were hard to address in the time allowed at meetings. In order to support relationship building, they didn't limit the online space to content-based discussion. The learned about people I've worked with for years," said one participant, referring to online conversations about everything from local theater to fiction to favorite vacations. "I was surprised at how much closer I now feel to colleagues after just this short time online." One member of the group who had a very low profile at f-t-f meetings turned out to have a wonderful sense of humor, which came through in his contributions to the café. At the next face-to-face meeting of the group, his relationship to others had changed significantly as he was now "one of the gang" and so more likely to be seen as a resource for others.

Attune everyone in the organization to each other's needs

People who engage in this kind of knowledge exchange are also more finely attuned to what other people in the organization need to know. You don't share

ideas with an organization; you share them with other people. Most people find that it's easier to be open and share ideas with people after informal conversations; exchanges about beer-brewing, or their dogs, or collecting Mexican folk art.

But it's not just the informal quality of these conversations that create the connection between people, it's that the experience is interactive. The more we go back-and-forth in a conversation, the more we know about each other and can tune our questions and comments to be more aligned with each others interests and needs.

Think back to when you were in 5th grade and went to the library to write a report on dinosaurs. A good school librarian interacted with you (or maybe already knew you) to find out what aspect of dinosaurs would be most relevant and interesting to you. That interaction was much more effective than just getting the card catalogue list of the hundreds of books and resources on the topic. Instead, the conversation you had with the librarian enabled you to narrow down and focus your search and make it both more efficient and more valuable. Humans are remarkable information/knowledge filter-ers. Getting information as part of a juicy interaction can be much more effective than just getting it "dry."

Responsiveness is rooted in relationship. The closer our relationship, the more likely I am to take the initiative to provide you with "intelligence" and the more I'll take the trouble to add value to the raw material. When I come across a great article in a magazine or meet someone who could be a key resource for someone in my social network, my instinct is to share it. If the network is supported by online technology, the likelihood of sharing is increased because it's so easy.

Multiply intellectual capital by the power of social capital

Everyone talks about how knowledge is the important asset. But it has to be applied to be useful. It gets applied via the processes associated with social capital.

In order to realize the benefits of working as an aligned, interdependent, system everyone needs to have conversations that are diverse, complex, and deal with everything from key routines to major strategies. Collaboration can be thought of as a network of different conversations.

deteriorate to being about logistical details, routine reports, and administrative matters except during infrequent face-to-face meetings. This just doesn't provide the "juice" you need to support the essential creative energy of teamwork because, in many cases, these conversations are the only shared experience groups have for long periods of time.

Organizations must create time and space for groups to have multiple, rich

conversations between meetings - which means that you need to find ways to use a range of communications technologies to support these conversations.

A prominent education association supports not only its own national staff but also scores of other key people at local and state organizations. The association holds many conferences and meetings throughout the year to bring together various staff groups, stakeholders, and committees. However, it was not until they held their first online conference that they were able to mix groups that ordinarily aren't at the same meeting. Although there were several specific topical themes for the virtual event, one of the expressed purposes was to create an online social network that would allow people from different levels and parts of the organization to see themselves as part of the larger whole and to understand how they could contribute significantly to each others' projects and initiatives. "Using online space allowed us to draw outside the lines of the organization chart," explained one of the project sponsors.

Create an ongoing, shared social space among geographic and departmentally dispersed people

The shared social space provides a sense of the whole that enables members of a widely distributed group to see themselves in context. Shared social space actually creates the identity of the group. There are many good examples of how this works from other aspects of life - the "home room," "the campus," "the town square." These are the contexts that help us define who we are as members of a particular group or community.

One of the most difficult challenges for people in a distributed organization is maintaining an image of itself as a whole. This is critical so that the team becomes more than just a loose collection of related parts. Working as a whole is what makes a team powerful. What is the context within which we are interacting?

Co-located teams can develop a shared image of themselves through experience sitting in a conference room, meeting in someone's office, having lunch together. In a distributed organization, people lack these images so you need other strategies for creating a sense of the whole so the team doesn't feel fragmented. A team space within an online network can provide a "home room" for the team where none exists in the physical world.

Good meeting facilitators often begin each meeting with some kind of "ice-breaker" to get the group started productively. These activities often involve discovering common affinities among members of the group, common pets, families, vacation experiences, or hobbies.

The purpose of these activities is to help you feel that you have enough of a relationship with that guy in Engineering so that when something comes up

where you really need to be getting some information or talking about Engineering, you're comfortable going to that person. You have confidence, they'll listen to you and that you'll listen to them. People know each other through conversations, not through documents. People connect with other people more strongly than they connect with other people's organizational roles.

It's just human nature. If you know somebody in Engineering, you don't care what his or her job title is, you may actually need somebody else. But you go to the person you know to help you get to where you really ought to be.

People who are geographically separated or on the road need a way of maintaining contact with their peers, whether they're in their specialty or a project team or in the company as a whole. The one or two times a year you do go to London you already have a relationship there. You can hit the ground running. And London knows what's happening in LA, and there is less reinventing of the wheel, and more coherence with a national or global corporate culture. An online social network can provide a means of creating these connections even when face-to-face meetings are infrequent or impossible.

There's always a problem of people across disciplines not speaking to each other's language. Turf boundaries and incomplete understanding of each other's specialties are always potential obstacles in modern organizations. The problem is exacerbated and leads to conflict when projects put people under pressure and they can't get what they want because someone with a different kind of need or goal is sequestering a resource, or is in line ahead of them. Or things get done, and they turn out not to be what was required, because they were done in a vacuum, without any attunement to other parts of the system.

So the "who knows who knows what?" problem is in part solved by having a large network of people, who would not ordinarily interact but who share a broad and deep common cause (such as working for the same company, interacting regularly, doing some problem-solving and some socializing. That creates a context in which when somebody really needs to know an answer or solution, others are likely to provide the right knowledge.

One of the most difficult things in a distributed organization is for members to "see" and feel what's happening above and around them in the organization - how does their part relate to the whole? They don't have a "line of sight" to key parts of the system and so feel disconnected which reduces their effectiveness. When groups are co-located, members often sit in on briefings, company announcements, and meetings of related groups. In distributed organizations, it's not unusual for the group manager to be the only one in regular contact with the group sponsor or other key players in the system and, therefore, the only one with a good view.

This problem is exacerbated when there is a critical mass of members in one

location and smaller groups elsewhere who will always feel that they are missing out on the action.

CC'ing people on meeting minutes isn't adequate, they need the stories, the feel, the picture, the emotional tone which is the essence of what they are missing by not being physically present at the meeting. Online social networks can provide some of that in-depth communication.

Amplify innovation

Groups of people can use online social networks to think together in new ways. When the affinity or common goal shared by the group is strong enough, mastery of group communication media leads people to invent things together in new ways.

The "low hanging fruit" of innovation in organizations is when one part of the organization can take something developed in another part, add something to it, and make it into something new and useful for them. The right kind of online social network can first of all identify when that kind of opportunity is possible, and second, it can bring the right people together with the right tools to facilitate the communication necessary to make this productive knowledge-transfer happen.

Create a Community Memory

Organizations run on conversations, but conversations are rarely structured and almost never recorded. Those strategically important conversations that are recorded in the form of minutes are not indexed to ongoing operations, so they could be used as a store of knowledge. Asynchronous, web-based conversations in the form of multimedia webconferences can structure and organize conversations and the support materials, including graphics, tables, links so that conversations automatically become valuable searchable knowledge basis. As experts on packet switching or organizational development share lore in an online discussion, the record of the discussion is indexed by category, keyword, and other means.

But a key thing to remember about these repositories is that they get VALUE by being used as references for new conversations, not by just being an archive of information. So what we need is a living system that taps into the knowledge base but that is continuously talking about new information.

Creating a place to put questions and answers, speculations and factoids, about marketing your product in Japan or how to use the new email system, and fostering social relationships among network participants, causes people to think in new ways. They might think something, read something, or hear something, and tag it for posting later in the appropriate online discussion.

Give people a community memory that's mapped well enough and that has a social element to it, so when an idea occurs, and you're on the bus home, you'll bring that to Group A in Place B, where we're discussing Topic C, which is really related to what I saw on that billboard there." That thought wouldn't have occurred, and that transmission wouldn't have occurred if you had not created the place, made it easy for people to find containers to put knowledge, and created a social context for it.

Improve the way individuals think collectively.

When the President of a large consumer health organization wanted to redraft the company's vision, he didn't want it to be an empty exercise or one that involved only a handful of people at headquarters. The company was comfortable using innovative meeting designs to increase involvement face-to-face. However, to create a vision that actually made a difference in how the company operated globally, the process needed to involve people from almost every continent and it was not economically or logistically feasible to fly hundreds of people to headquarters in New Jersey. So instead, the company convened a four-week online meeting to network stakeholders from every part of the organization in a conversation about the future. One of the important aspects of this online event was that it took place over time making it possible for the group to engage in substantive conversations rather than just receive a broadcast of a speech from headquarters with some Q&A. Interacting with each other was even more important than interacting with the new proposals. Participants had an opportunity to preview the new language, add unique perspectives from different regions, and talk with each other about how the key ideas in the vision statement resonated with personal experience. As a result, the participants in this online network meeting felt both that they had influenced the outcome and that they had a stake in making it work. The sponsor of the online event said of the process, "We could not have gotten the quality result we got any other way." A rich social network makes it possible to move from knowledge-sharing to collective knowing.

Because you're externalizing a lot more when you're on an on-line environment, you end up processing your whole life differently in a way. I know that I experience that. A lot of times I'm thinking about how I'm going to communicate and the experience I'm having as I'm having it, which actually has the effect of tuning it up for me, because I'm more sharp in my experiencing of it because since it's so easy to communicate it to my team or other people, it's not if I happen to run into them in the hall I might, it's that I know I can proactively choose to communicate it, therefore it's worth thinking about how I would articulate it. Therefore I undergo the cognitive process of understanding what I'm experiencing in a way that's communicable an exercise that raises my own level of experience.

You're not just quantitatively increasing the amount of knowledge that's been

exchanged, you're qualitatively improving the process by which people perceive things in the world that are useful to the organization, and transmit that. Even when I don't end up ever putting it on-line, it's still had an effect on my own thinking, to have thought through how and if I'll communicate whatever it is, or how it doesn't relate to any of these conversations or not, and if so, how. Just that, that's a one tick up reflective thinking process that's catalyzed by being in that kind of environment.

You improve thinking.

Doug Engelbart asked in 1963 "What if we used computers to think and communicate with?" and he said, "What if you had an automatic typewriter?", essentially describing word processing. He pointed out that such a machine, which didn't exist until his laboratory invented it, not only makes it easier to retype pages, but also induces you to try many different things, because it makes it so much easier to see how it looks without retyping the whole thing. Therefore a low level change in your hierarchy of skills, the ability to move sentences and paragraphs around amplifies higher-level cognitive communication capability.

Turn training into a continuous process

The old model of training was that people went away from their job site to a program that was held in a special place at a special time. Often, the people most knowledgeable about the subject in the organization had "core dumped" their knowledge to the training staff so that it could be packaged for later consumption. The new model of training is more "just-in-time" where training is made available when the trainee actually needs to apply the new information or skill. Instead of being an "event," learning is something that can happen all the time. Instead of the experts providing a sub-set of their knowledge to others, training can involve THE right expert directly. Communication is an environment you live in, not something that happens to you through formal classes. A recent consulting services client said that the product life cycle in their company was now shorter than the amount of time it took to design and deploy a traditional training course. Therefore by the time they could deploy the training course deployed, it was way too late. They are forced to look at more continuous and therefore conversational contexts for training.

Attract and retain the best people with social capital

We are at the beginning of an era where good employees are an increasingly scarce resource. The ability to attract and retain good people is much more important than it's ever been before. A strong community is an attraction to outsiders - strong face to face communities that have an appropriate online component constitute social capital that is only accessible to those inside the company.

Strong social networks can be a factor in retaining people at a time when

competition for good employees is fierce. Allegiance to a key network within an organization could be a barrier to jumping across the parking lot to the company across the street.

But creating this allegiance requires more than providing Intranet portals with general discussions about software or hobbies that can be replicated by any organization. For online discourse to become authentically useful social glue, part of the online and offline conversation has to be about the company at a deep level, it can't just be about the baseball team.

Online networks make it possible to engage many more employees in these deep conversations about the kind of company we're trying to be, what market we're trying to be in, what's important about the way we do need to have internal online events that would reflect or in fact be designed by people in the community.

Online Social Networks Are A Key Strategic Resource

You get the biggest payoff for having a distributed organization when groups can work together across departments, functions, and roles on developing strategies to respond to changing conditions. This is where organization becomes more than the sum of its parts. Instead of relying on small, isolated groups or outside consultants, organizations can leverage their social network to identify opportunities and resources for strategic initiatives.

But strategy requires communication about more than project milestones and logistics. To support strategy, the communication across the network must be rich, conversational, continuous, and involve everyone in the organization. The danger for distributed organizations is that their communication about strategy becomes disjointed because members lack the environment to support substantive, ongoing (between face-to-face meetings) discussions. Many people believe erroneously that f-t-f meetings are the only time you can have this type of exchange. New skills are required to engage with each other effectively at different times from different places.

This is where the organization can get the biggest payoff for investing in communications resources (time, energy, supporting technology). An organization that does this well can create strategies, processes, and new approaches it needs to thrive.

Conversations are the lifeblood of modern organizations. Until recently, the knowledge and understandings conveyed in meetings and memos and water cooler bull sessions just leaked into the air. The great advantage of new media is not how much information they can put at disposal of individuals and organizations but the kind of conversations they make possible. The technology for sharing knowledge and cementing powerful social networks is no longer

rarely accessible or expensive. The knowledge of how to use the technology, not the software or the physical means of transporting it, will be the strategic advantage of those who possess it and diffuse it.