

Organisations are rushing to jump on board the web 2.0 bandwagon, which seem to offer a collection of affordable tools to collaborate and share knowledge. While many organisations are currently experimenting with social media tools, strong successes are still relatively rare.

Consider the following scenario: an organisation introduces collaboration by piloting a discussion forum. The topic chosen is 'staff employment conditions'. There are few guidelines, no mediation and anonymous posts are allowed. It starts off encouragingly, but soon descends into a storm of personal attacks, with strong opinions expressed about an emotive topic. The organisation wonders what happened.

A review discovers that while the organisation is not large, it is made up of self-sufficient business units in several locations with little interaction between the teams. The organisational structure, the management style, and the physical layout of individual offices, do not encourage cross-organisational communications.

As a result, staff are unaware of who is in the organisation, what functions are performed, or what skills exist. Effectively the discussion forum has been an online exchange between strangers.

The existence of collaborative tools does not automatically imply that people will collaborate or collaborate effectively.

A culture of communication

It is a simple concept, but if people are not already communicating with each other, then there is little chance they will feel comfortable enough to share their knowledge online.

Organisations need to ensure the basics of communication are established before heading down the collaboration path.

Staff must share a common understanding of the organisation, its functions, organisational structure and its role in the broader industry.

Staff also need an awareness of who else works in the organisation, the functions of each team, and the skills within those teams.

With these basics in place, staff have a framework within which to communicate and develop

working relationships based on trust and respect. Only then, are people going to work together and share knowledge for a common outcome.

The role of the intranet

Building an organisation's internal communication capabilities takes specialist skills, a cohesive strategy and a variety of tools, one of which is the intranet. Following are several familiar intranet features which underpin communication and also support collaborative initiatives.

Staff directory

The staff directory, with information about each person's position in the organisational structure, their project history, skills and expertise, is an excellent mechanism for enabling people to get in touch with each other, regardless of their location.

News channel

Staff need up-to-date information about internal changes and external influences which may impact their daily work. A comprehensive news section, including global corporate and local operational news, external media reports and industry updates, ensures that people who are collaborating have the same basic understanding of their organisation.

Social site

Not all communication within an organisation is business-focused. Other informal communication between employees, helps build a sense of community. A place on the intranet for sharing information and news about social events also contributes to an awareness of others within the organisation.

Initial experiments with collaboration are likely to be disappointing if the organisation doesn't already have a culture of communication. It is essential that organisations address the basics of communication before expecting staff to be willing to share their knowledge.