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MASTERCLASS

Virtual water cooler

Would an enterprise social network benefit your firm? H el ene Russell suggests some key considerations

THREE THINGS YOU WILL LEARN FROM THIS MASTERCLASS:

- 1 What enterprise social networks are and how they work
- 2 How to decide whether to invest in an enterprise social network
- 3 Which features to consider when creating your shortlist

An increasing number of law firms are starting to take enterprise social networks (ESN) seriously. If you are wondering whether an ESN could help your business with its internal operations, rather than as a client-facing marketing tool, this article aims to help you to consider the options and narrow the choices before deciding which system is for you.

Enterprise social media or enterprise social networks are the names given to systems which function in a similar way to online social networks like Facebook and Twitter, but which sit internally within a firm and aim to help it to achieve its business goals. They tend to include some or all of the following functionality:

- newsfeeds;
- instant messaging and/or chat;
- wikis;
- blogs;
- microblogging;
- commenting;
- file sharing;
- task assignment/management; and
- tagging for personalised taxonomies/folksonomies.

This article can't advise you whether Yammer, Tibbr, IBM Connections or Jive will work best for your firm or whether you will need a bespoke widely-integrated system, a discreet add-on or something in between.

Which system/platform works for your firm will depend upon what business need it has to fulfil, how the existing workforce work most effectively, what IT systems and support are currently in place, what the network capacity is, what the budget is and whether the business wants to and can afford to try to future-proof itself.

This article instead aims to arm you with some information about ESNs and some questions to ask in order to narrow the options before you make your decision.

Getting started

1. What problem is the firm hoping to solve? What are its business goals?

Before looking at different systems, first try to understand how the ESN will help the firm to achieve its business goals.

ESNs are effective and engaging online communication tools. They tend to work intuitively and simply, facilitating listening, conversation, content creation and collaboration. Being online, they tend to work best where sheer scale or a dispersed workforce precludes person-to-person communication.

This means that, within law firms, they tend to be most useful in helping to improve:

- expertise and expert finding;
- open dialogue and information sharing;
- knowledge sharing and improving knowledge transparency;

- creating and capturing new ideas;
- collaboration;
- co-authoring and co-editing documents;
- electronic water-cooler conversations; and
- leveraging capabilities beyond hierarchies and internal boundaries.

No technology provides a magic solution to these business challenges and many factors affect successful implementation but, if for example a firm's business goal of improved efficiency and improved customer care within X department would best be implemented via these tasks, an ESN may be the right solution.

2. What is your firm's real culture?

Are your staff good at knowledge sharing or do they hoard what they know? Will they share readily in person or informally, but shy away from sharing in meetings or formally submitting documents for your knowledge system?

You will need to understand how staff communicate and share knowledge, as well as how ready people at various levels within the business are to use social software. All levels within the organisation needn't be keen on social media for an ESN to succeed, but be aware of potential problems.

For example, if you are looking for a means to improve informal communication at partnership level to widen knowledge about key clients for cross-selling purposes and your partners already enjoy using Twitter and Tumblr, an ESN may be a simple solution.

If, however, they are culturally against social media, it doesn't matter how great



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the tool is, the cost in effort needed to overcome this may suggest that you should look at different solutions.

Lastly, when looking at your firm’s culture and readiness for social networks, don’t make assumptions. I know one firm in which everyone was surprised to find that it was the partners aged 50-plus who used Yammer more than the rest of the firm because they enjoyed the immediacy of online conversation.

Defining requirements

Once it has been clarified what business need the ESN will meet and you have a view about who will use it and how, the following questions should help you to understand what your ‘must haves’ may be, although it will be

important to continuously track, monitor and adjust these.

1. To what extent does it need to integrate with other systems?

It is possible to have a successful standalone ESN which isn’t supported by the firm’s IT department, but any firm choosing this option should be aware of the challenges which go with this and investigate and quantify the support and maintenance costs.

If an integrated system is important, consider the following:

- Will the ESN integrate with existing platforms and modes of working?
- Do users need a system which allows access to all of their tools from one portal/window within their desktop?
- Can your IT department support the system? If not, how affordable is outside support?
- Will the ESN integrate across functions? Integration across different legal departments is likely to be a ‘must have’, but also check whether it needs to integrate with your support professionals (i.e. HR, business

development, and information and library services). ESNs can be excellent for making client knowledge transparent at all levels across the firm’s hierarchy.

2. What level of security is needed?

An ESN may be an internal system behind the firm’s firewall, but client confidentiality and data security will still need to be carefully managed.

Firewalls, data encryption, password protection, control rights, different levels of access and permissions for saving documents and conversations, and different monitoring options are all aspects of security that will need investigation and assessment.

3. Can it be accessed from work mobile and user-owned devices?

Bring your own device (BYOD) and mobile working are growing trends which need to be considered. If users are likely to be working on their work mobiles and/or personal devices in the near future, you need to be confident that your ESN will work equally well on different devices and also be as secure on them.

This may not be an important factor for

“Understand how staff communicate and share knowledge”

all of your teams at present, but will users need the ESN to work on their mobile devices in future?

4. Is it easy for your staff to use?

As with all knowledge systems, it is important that your ESN is usable for your target end users. For ESNs, this often means choosing one with a familiar-seeming interface or one that is easy to learn to use.

ESNs generally tend to be quite intuitive, but you will need the input of potential users to understand whether the system you have in mind works in the same way that your users work. This is an investment, as it takes staff away from fee earning or supporting fee earners, but it could save you a considerable amount of time and money at a later stage.

Many systems are individually customisable, enabling staff to track or follow specific people and activities, to avoid being distracted by irrelevancies.

5. Does it offer workable data and produce useful information?

At the most basic level, it will be important to continue to check whether the system is value for money, so the system must be able work with the data it produces: to capture, mine, analyse and visualise it.

Many systems can do much more and have highly customisable analytics/insights. If you are going to use the system for expertise and expert finding, for example, you will probably also want a system with the ability to assess users' influence.

Choosing features

Not all businesses need the following features in their ESN and this is not an exhaustive list of 'must haves'. Instead, these are some features which you may not initially have thought are important,

but perhaps need more investigation.

1. Profiles

Know-who is often as important as know-how, especially if your firm is large and/ or your staff prefer one-to-one knowledge-sharing. If this is something that your firm needs, you might want an ESN with rich, searchable profiles and the ability to find and follow people, as well as to know who is online at any time to chat. Some systems offer easy integration with existing company directories to keep everything in sync.

2. Sharing all types of media

You may already have listed the ability to upload, share and collaborate on documents as one of your requirements, but don't ignore the need to share other types of media. This isn't about your staff sharing videos of pandas sneezing or photos of kittens. Much of what happens during knowledge transfer and recall is based on far more than the written word.

Photos of flipchart notes from a training session can often lead to a richer recall for attendees than typed-up notes of the session and take less time to upload. Also, much of what is passed between people when discussing complex issues is transferred through gestures, expressions and tone of voice, so video clips can be very effective knowledge-sharing tools.

3. Group creation and project management

Most systems allow users to create groups, but they vary in terms of the level of capability. Some systems permit the assignment of different people in different roles to different projects, enable some people to check who is using which documents and why, and enable different groups to be managed together as a whole.

4. Recognising and rewarding participation

Some systems enable users and managers to identify which users are sharing useful content and have influence on the group. This is intended to reward participation, but can be subject to gaming.¹

Consider what recognition and rewards work with your staff now and what is subject to gaming, and assess whether the influence/reward system within the ESN will help or hinder your business overall.

Making a decision

There are many kinds of enterprise social network. Which one you choose will depend upon:

- which business need you are seeking to fulfil;
- how your staff work effectively;
- what IT systems and support you currently have;
- what your budget is; and
- whether you want to and can afford to try to future-proof your firm.

Hopefully, having investigated the answers to the questions above and thought a little more about some of the possible features, you will be in a good position to choose a system which provides value for money for your firm. ^{mp}

Hélène Russell advises and trains law firms on knowledge sharing for improved effectiveness, efficiency and profitability (www.theknowledgebusiness.co.uk)

Endnote

1. See 'KM healthcheck', Hélène Russell, *Managing Partner*, Vol. 15 Issue 4, Dec 2012/Jan 2013