IT Analysis – All alone in a Social World?

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Imagine that you are in a room with another person. You have the choice to ignore them, and likewise they could ignore you. Let's assume that you both decide that you will interact with each other. You enter into a discussion, and you find that you have certain things in common, and you both learn something new from the interaction. The more people that there are in the room, the better the chance of such serendipitous interactions happening—and herein lies the great promise of social networking. By providing an environment where everyone can be available, interactions can be made with people who you would never have been able to contact before, and their depth and breadth of knowledge can be added to the areas where you need such skills.

OK—now back to the original thought.

Now, let's assume that we have the same room, but that a very thick wall has been built across the middle of it—floor to ceiling. You are on one side, and the other person is on the other. How do you know that the person is there? Unfortunately, you don't and, as such, any opportunity for any interaction just isn't there. If your room has a lot of people in it, then there's less thought or interest from yourself that there just may be something else, something that may matter, beyond that wall. The serendipitous meeting has just become slightly less possible—you still have those in the same room as yourself, but you may not even consider that there are other, equally large groups, elsewhere.

Back to the environment…

OK, so we now have the same room, with a wall down the middle, but now with a door in it. You are stood there, all alone in your bit of the room, but you can, if you choose, open the door and see who or what is in the other room. If you open the door, you see the other person, and you can choose, as at the beginning, whether to ignore them or to attempt to interact with them.

You then find that you do not speak the same language, and from there that you do not share any common spoken language. You move on to miming actions and using drawn pictures, and amidst a degree of misunderstanding and much mirth, you manage to get some salient points across as to who you both are and what the areas for exchange of information would be.

Well, that's how it would probably be in the real world, but here is the problem with the virtual, social networking world. There is no lingua franca, there is little capability to try different means of discussion or interaction. In fact, the doors remain closed and locked in many cases.

What we have allowed to grow is a multi-dimensional room with a multitude of doors leading from it, each one unmarked, many of them without handles, many completely locked, some even with "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here" written above them. New doors are appearing all the time—and fewer and fewer people are interested in even trying to open the doors, tending to look inwards only to those who are already in the same room.

Just how can we not only unlock the doors, but open them wide, and then enable social networking denizens to wander from world to world freely, interacting and exchanging information in a meaningful manner?

At a base level, we have the problems of just interacting between similar social networking sites, for example, enabling one person on one wiki to exchange information with all other wikis at the same time. Recently, there has been an explosion in aggregation sites, particularly around blogging, enabling activities and events that happen on multiple sites to be reflected via the aggregating site. However, each different type of social networking site does tend to have its own "vocabulary"—sending someone a "hug" on FaceBook is difficult at this stage to represent to a person using LinkedIn, for example.

Further up the scale we have the problems of how different types of site interact with each other. For example, how could we take the interactions between avatars within Second Life and move this meaningfully into Bebo?

Already, Second Life/Linden Labs and IBM are looking at creating a standard for an open avatar, where people can use the same avatar across multiple immersive sites. However, this only works across these types of sites, and still gives no capability for interaction between different types of sites. OK, people can use URLs to route people from one environment to another, but context tends to be lost, and people have chosen a particular type of environment because it feels good for them.

Is it possible to define a common language that means that we could all interact, no matter where we are? I think so—we already have xml as a base means of defining and exchanging information. If we looked at the various sites and got each one to define a vocabulary for the actions that are taken within its own environment, we have a starting point. For example, the idea of a "hug" in FaceBook is fairly easy to define as an action within Second Life. Even for those who would like to interact at a basic level—let's say that a Second Life user is dealing with an instant messaging user, an action by an avatar can be represented through the use of emoticons or by a description of the action within parentheses.

After all, everyone wants to be able to work within the environment that suits them—the many "evangelists" for each type of social networking tend to be blinkered and believe that everything under the sun can be done through their chosen medium, but if the medium does not suit the user, it makes no difference. Only by making each different medium work with the others will we be able to make full serendipity happen—and it's not too late for this to be enabled across the social networking worlds.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, Dell, T-Mobile, Vodafone, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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