

# Social Media as Change Catalyst

Elizabeth S. Choo, Walter Gossage and Trinity Martin

When properly designed and deployed, social media can propel an organization through a major change initiative with greater transparency, communication and efficiency.

Most companies understand that they should use social media for marketing. And most organizations are taking advantage of it for recruiting, too. But what about using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube along with messaging and conferencing tools for large-scale organizational change? When properly designed and deployed, they can serve this purpose.



## ON THE WEB

Social media is usually beneficial, but Stephen Miles, founder and CEO of human capital consulting firm the Miles Group, notes an interesting side effect firms should prepare for: [talentmgt.com/materials/view/35/](http://talentmgt.com/materials/view/35/).

In his book *Leading Change*, John P. Kotter, a professor of leadership at Harvard Business School, claims that as many as 70 percent of change initiatives in organizations fail to meet expectations. Why? Kotter wrote that companies struggle with orga-

nizational change on multiple levels.

For instance, a company rolling out upgrades to a global enterprise system also might be engaged in a major restructuring of functions and leadership teams. Or it might be coping with a difficult cost reduction program while also looking to sell products to new customers as part of a globalization strategy.

Executives can no longer tell their people to adjust to a difficult change program until “things return to normal.” The need to constantly shift and adjust is normal.

Another reason for change failure is related to challenges managing expectations and communication — creating a shared vision, gaining buy-in or monitoring progress. These challenges are well suited to the distinctive features and benefits associated with social media

and collaboration tools, such as the ability to connect people quickly, to create opportunities for them to share and learn, and to monitor a collective conversation to see how well a change program is producing its intended benefits.

What follows are some ways social media can support effective management of large-scale change.

**Share experiences across a knowledge network:** Executives know that achieving success in a change situation requires more than just telling everyone about the new ways things are going to be done. Acceptance of change can be accelerated across the organization through the real-time exchange of ideas.

Social media provides an effective, two-way communications medium and enables people to establish formal and informal knowledge networks as a large-scale change initiative proceeds. Such networks can help employees get information about processes or technologies, share innovative practices and receive timely answers.

Microsoft, for instance, employs an internal platform called Academy Mobile that employees can use to share knowledge by creating and posting audio and video podcasts. Download traffic for the platform doubled in its first two years.

The value of this social media and collaboration platform resides largely in how easily employees across Microsoft can translate interactions, meetings or timely personal insights into content that can generate ideas to support the change initiative.

For example, using the platform, virtual meetings can be captured, catalogued, indexed and converted to video or audio. Content is searchable, organized and catalogued by topic, creating a kind of virtual, on-demand curriculum, which is also available on mobile devices.



Yammer, a social network that enables co-workers to communicate and share information with one another, also enables leaders of a change program to get consistent messages to employees.

Leadership participation in social media in this vein is essential because amid the cacophony of exchanges across a social media platform, management has to have a way of keeping the organization “on message” — not only correcting misinformation and quashing incorrect rumors, but also injecting a lively and authoritative voice into the mix.

Without that ability to provide a “voice of truth,” collaboration tools can cause confusion and discontent to multiply at greater speed across an organization, which ultimately undermines change effectiveness.

Leaders of change programs — and designated members of their teams — should be active participants in the dialogue, encouraging constructive idea sharing and providing a trusted and credible source of information. This reinforces the fact that employees can use social media not only to voice ideas and concerns, but also to get accurate and credible answers to questions about a company’s change effort.

**Build a collaborative culture:** Social media also can help in cases where creating a more collaborative culture is one of the major objectives of the change initiative.

This has been the case with the United States Transportation Command. Because of new responsibilities the agency had been given across the entire U.S. Department of Defense supply chain — from factory to point of delivery — executives sought to change the structure and culture of the agency from a command-and-control emphasis to one that encouraged staff to interact directly with executives.

In late 2009 and early 2010, the agency launched several social media initiatives including an executive blog and a Q&A blog hosted on its intranet, and a public presence on Facebook and Twitter.

The executive blog enables executives to hear directly from staff without having messages filtered through intermediate management levels. These social media programs, which generated more than 5 million impressions, have flattened the organizational hierarchy and driven positive culture shifts, as measured by an annual staff survey. The collaboration and networking platforms are empowering employees, customers and partners to be active participants in the agency's global conversation.

**Create targeted and timely learning:** Learning programs are an essential part of any major change initiative. A new system, market or set of processes might mean that people must be trained on how to work in the changed environment. In many cases, formal learning programs carry the major part of the load. However, because no change program follows a predictable course, companies must have the ability to rapidly develop shorter bites of learning about timely developments or let employees be their own teachers.

Social media can be effective in delivering personalized learning experiences related to a change initiative, not just general broadcasts of information. Organizations are using collaboration platforms in a variety of ways to encourage effective workforce enablement, such as: video casts with short learning segments relevant to the change initiative or aspects of it; live Web meetings and high-end video conferencing that bring together dispersed teams for a common learning experience; and user-generated content platforms such as YouTube or newer video sharing platforms that target the enterprise space, allowing staff members to provide short video or audio training segments relevant to the change program.

**Take the pulse of change:** How an executive team objectively measures progress during the course of a change journey is always a tough question to answer.

One method frequently employed in the online era is to administer employee surveys. But these have limitations. Survey fatigue often sets in for employees. Further, a survey only measures how people feel at a certain point in time.

By contrast, collaboration networks enable executive leaders to see exchanges as they develop. Social media can help leadership take the current pulse or general sentiment of employees about a change program to determine what's going well and where the current pain points are.

## Employees can use social media to voice ideas and concerns, but also to get credible answers to questions about a company's change effort.

These "temperature checks" can be done qualitatively by monitoring and participating in the social networking stream. They also can be done quantitatively by assessing the number of site visits, conversations and downloads, measured against a predetermined baseline.

Innovative analytic tools are also available that can assess trends in behaviors and attitudes exhibited on social platforms and translate that data into engagement and change adoption metrics. Rather than waiting a week or longer for an analysis, executive teams can participate in a minute-by-minute representation of how things are going. These timely perspectives can help companies change course quickly and respond to events in a more agile manner.

**Manage complex workflows:** Social media tools can help leadership manage a change program more nimbly too. For example, in June, Jason Henrichs, chief operating officer of financial services firm PerkStreet Financial, told a market analyst from Software Advice that some PerkStreet project teams use Yammer to facilitate project efficiency.

Instead of holding meetings in person, each team member makes a daily Yammer post, using a common hashtag about accomplishments, goals and barriers.

Henrichs said the capability is like a perpetual meeting without the need to interrupt everyday work. And because the conversations are visible to everyone, management can gain better insight into team progress and prevent redundant or off-target work.

**Improve employee engagement:** One of the critical success factors for managing large-scale change programs is engaging employees in the change, helping them feel ownership of the initiative and tapping into their energy to advance the business and resolve issues.

Social media allows information to flow in multiple directions rather than just from the top down. For example, using wikis and microblogs — applications for sharing short bursts of information — organizations can crowd source ideas and involve employees more directly in a change program.

These platforms also can enable managers to give public recognition for employees' exceptional work and participants on the platform to support their team members. Seeing colleagues commenting or clicking "Like" to postings and ideas can boost morale.

These kinds of activities also can help management identify what the current hot ideas are and where they are coming from. That information can help change leaders alter course if necessary or identify ways to

improve what they are already doing. The buzz of activity on social media could even result in the "next big thing" for a company.

Social media is an important addition to the traditional tools and techniques by which major change programs are managed. It can increase the acceptance of change and advance an organization more predictably toward its business goals.

These tools also can deliver a better change experience for employees. From an overall business perspective, the use of social media to improve communications, encourage participation and promote understanding can reduce the time an organization needs to navigate large-scale change programs and increase the success rate. **TM**

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Elizabeth S. Choo is a consultant with management consultancy Accenture. Walter Gossage is a managing director and Trinity Martin is a senior manager within Accenture's communications, media and technology group. They can be reached at [editor@talentmgt.com](mailto:editor@talentmgt.com).

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