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## **Social Networking: The Water Cooler Reinvented**

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Remember the days when people had time to get to know their co-workers? Now it seems we're too busy to learn about the person sitting next to us. The days of standing around the water cooler sharing stories about the weekend are long gone... until now.

Yet again the Internet has reinvented the way people communicate, this time creating virtual environments for people to get to know each other. Known as "social networking," the idea that individuals could link electronically to create forums for social interaction began back in 1995. Now, aided by the latest Web 2.0 principles, more recent Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook (News - Alert) have made social networking mainstream. Hundreds and hundreds of social sites exist for every imaginable interest, from dog lovers to bookworms to musicians.

Developing and sustaining personal relationships over the Web may seem strictly like a consumer application. In actuality however, social networking at its foundation is about connecting people, fostering continuous communication and sharing information. The reality is that creating virtual communities and capturing the resulting knowledge is even more appealing for businesses, which need tools for managing dispersed workforces and leveraging vast amounts of data for strategic problem solving.

### **A Culture of Collaboration**

Creating communication channels specifically for peer-to-peer interactions has far reaching benefits for any organization. Breaking down silos inherent in a traditional corporate environment and enabling collaboration to take place among subject experts helps foster innovation and growth. In fact, the Gartner (News - Alert) Group recently stated that "enterprise social software will be the biggest new workplace technology success story of this decade. Thirty percent of enterprises will openly sponsor internal, social sharing spaces to help employees find others with similar interest, skills, backgrounds and experiences."

When a company implements an effective online social network it provides a vehicle for employees to help connect with each other. When customer service representatives are dispersed across the country (such as with the home-based agent model), work different hours or are

assigned to different programs, the need for an online forum is more important than ever because impromptu conversations simply can't take place any other way. Having an online space to share experiences, advice, even pictures or recipes, connects home-based agents to each other and the company. Within 30 days of launching our online social network, Alpine Access had over 1,500 employees using it.

Implementing a successful online social network also allows call center organizations to capture and share information as it happens. Companies with social networks experience lower operating costs and improve customer service, along with additional business benefits such as:

**Attract qualified talent.** Virtual call centers need to attract Internet-savvy individuals. These prospective employees are already using social networking to foster and sustain personal relationships. They'll likely be looking for technology-forward organization when considering their next career move.

**Strengthen employee loyalty and increase retention.** Using an internal social networking site helps employees connect with other team members from across the country. One of Alpine Access' customer service representatives said, "It makes our virtual world more of a reality. It's like walking into someone's office and seeing pictures or learning other things about them." These types of personal connections tie people together and create a more positive feeling about the company. It also gives people another reason to stay with the company, reducing attrition costs.

**Build strong brands.** Brands are built by the people that live them everyday. This is especially true for companies who elect to use outside partners for their customer service needs. The interactions people have with customer service representatives directly impact brand perceptions. Agents who feel connected to each other and the companies provide a higher level of quality service.

**Foster communication.** While the network allows for casual social interaction, it can also be used to quickly distribute company information or team messages. For example, posting information on a company bulletin board is much more efficient than sending out multiple copies of the same message.

**Utilize information in real-time.** The ability to access a company's collective knowledge and act on the information in real-time is crucial for success. Imagine a customer service representative struggling to handle a difficult customer. Using instant messaging or bulletin boards, that call center rep can pose a question and immediately receive multiple suggestions from agents who successfully resolved the same situation. What can be even more beneficial is that many social networking sites automatically save this online correspondence for access by other employees at a later date.

**Improve problem solving.** No one is an expert on everything. Leadership teams are comprised of subject matter experts. When a problem occurs, many times it takes longer to find who has the answer than it does to implement the solution. An online network makes it fast and easy to get help from the right people.

**Bolster training and employee input.** In an industry characterized by high attrition rates, training can be an expensive line item in any call center budget. Even in a virtual environment, the time required to prepare effective training materials and conduct online classes can be quite significant. An online social network creates an important infrastructure for fostering effective online learning. Not only can the information be supported and expanded with real-life examples, but it provides an opportunity to conduct small group learning in a non-threatening way that encourages participation. When you allow experienced agents to share best practices with one another, you turn training into an ongoing process rather than a scheduled activity that only happens during class time.

**Encourage and foster innovation.** In a 2006 study conducted by IBM (News - Alert), more than 700 CEOs identified employees, partners and clients as the top three sources for innovations that will drive future growth. These same CEOs also said that the ability to collaborate was a distinguishing characteristic of successful companies. Your employees are your front line. They know what works, what doesn't and what could be improved. A social network provides an opportunity for people to voice their ideas, which may lead to your next company breakthrough.

Never before has it been possible to create a database of first-hand knowledge and make it available in real-time to the entire company. While technology provides important tools, it's the people within your organization that provide the solutions. Don't underestimate the power of this traditionally untapped resource. Social networks can be especially important for home-based agent call centers. These sites essentially eliminate common communication barriers, allowing people to communicate across time-zones, across geographic boundaries and across programs. The resulting collective knowledge can improve existing practices, enhance current training methods and may help uncover the next revolutionary idea. Employees make the difference between high-performing companies and under-performing ones. I encourage you to leverage their knowledge wisely to achieve your business goals.