

1999

5

Message

Social Tools: Business Culture in the Post-Everything Economy

I was shopping at Tower Music recently, and bought a CD. The jewel box had a sticky label with a one-line review introducing the band (the Low Fidelity Allstars, if you are interested) as one of the hottest to emerge in the 'post-everything' music scene. The music is cool, but the tag line on the sticky label - the 'post-everything' handle -- has stuck with me more than the music.

Perhaps I am catching the millennial fever that seems endemic to all high-tech journalism these days... I am showing the symptoms. As one example, I am bored with the parade of would-be characterizations of the current business scene. I am disenchanted with the notion that we are in an Information Economy, as the popular media maintain. Because information is not the issue. What people are doing with information, and information technology, is important. Porter suggested we were in an 'information revolution' in 1984, and while we may still be in a revolution, information is not the defining issue any longer, even if it was in 1984.

I have listened to the conventional wisdom about knowledge management, and I have come to believe that while knowledge is important and critical, the mainstream thinking around business knowledge is too static and limiting. It is way too focussed on 'hard knowledge' that can be equated to tangible assets and managed in a analogous way to tangible assets, and not focussed enough on 'soft knowledge': the slippery, messy, and interpersonal side of the picture. So I am holdin off on calling this brave new world the Knowledge Economy, at least until a messier view of knowledge becomes commonplace.

The Internet is big, and is playing a major role in the redefinition of business, so maybe this could be the Internet Economy. But, no. The importance of the Internet is not the gazillion sites and animated gifs, but how our notions of interaction are changing because we can interact through a lateral communication labyrinth.

Fast Company magazine has exploded on the scene, captivating the hordes of today's corporate ronin -- the self-employed, free agent, inveterately entrepreneurial, and success-worshipping thirty-somethings who teem at the fringe of high technology. Is it the Fast Economy? Is speed the quintessential factor of our today's business? I think not. The world is not spinning faster, and the speed of light is still the same. What has happened is something in the interaction of people -- they are inventing more, collectively, producing more experiments, more glorious failures, more gizmos, gadgets, words, and ideas than at any time in history. So 'fast' is wrong, although 'more' is on the right track.

Along with these problems, I hate the notion that every important idea has to be compressible into a time span equivalent to the currently shortest commercials being played on television, which are now 10 to 20 seconds. It used to be that every company needed the so-called 'elevator speech' where you explained your company in a few sentences, the length of an elevator ride. Today, it is expected that you can characterize your firm in an 'escalator speech' -- a single noun phrase, one noun and at most two adjectives, like "application service provider" or "knowledge management consulting". With

What is this new economy we are in? Is it truly the 'Internet age,' 'The Fast economy' or the 'Knowledge economy?' I suggest we are in the 'Post-Everything' economy, where we can ignore the buzz and focus on what we are trying to evolve.

Exposure to **Abuzz Beehive**, an innovative expertise-based email technology, and Abuzz CTO, **Sean Kutz**, sparks a series of thoughts on the new role of tools filling the cracks in business culture.

Editor
Stowe Boyd



1999

5

Message

We invented the Information Revolution, and its constructs, as a means to happen to ourselves. In the Post-Everything Revolution, we know that culture -- the interpersonal processes within and across business -- is the groundwave of change and the epicenter of the new economy.

Message is an at-least-monthly newsletter published by Running Light.

Subscription: \$195/year.

Editor and Publisher –

Stowe Boyd

11195 Longwood Grove Drive
Reston VA 20194 US

+1 703 435 1980

+1 703 708 9055 (fax)

stoweboyd@runninglight.com

www.runninglight.com

networks experimenting with one second commercials, where that leave us?

The Whole is Greater than the Sum of the Parts

I don't mean that industrialism, the Cold War, or information technology have left no legacy. On the contrary. All of the trends, movements, and waves are relevant in some way. Every thread woven into the fabric of the modern business mindset plays its part. In effect, using the term 'Post-Everything Economy' is a slight of hand, a rhetorical trick, a trompe d'oeil.

By 'Post-Everything' I really mean that we are coming around to an integration of all the business 'Revolutions' that have occurred. This revolution is about cultural reintegration, the awareness that the Information Revolution (and the Industrial Revolution, and the Agricultural Revolution) didn't happen to us, like a meteor hitting Earth, some extrinsic event. We invented the Information Revolution, and its constructs, as a means to happen to ourselves. In the Post-Everything Revolution, we know that culture -- the interpersonal processes within and across business -- is the groundwave of change and the epicenter of the new economy.

The Rise of Social Tools

The big story of the transformation of business culture isn't the props -- the servers, networks, ten million web sites, and all the information lying around in databases and in HTML -- but what people are saying to each other and how they coordinate their actions, behavior, and goals. The big story is that the global computer network is a enormous chat room, enabling us to collaborate in unexpected, complex, and novel ways. We are experimenting with new social systems, systems that to an unprecedented degree involve software and hardware.

In the 60's it had become unthinkable to run a business without a telephone on every desk. By the late 80's, everyone had to have email. The need for cost-justification of these new expenses, at first demanded by management, fell by the wayside as the second-order effects -- the social impacts -- became felt.

The rise of PCs has not led to increase in productivity relative to things that people formerly did without PCs, like writing letters and memos, or selling widgets. PCs have decreased productivity in these areas. Why? Because people are spending their time in new activities, activities that were not possible before, and adding new value to the business. And all that comes for a price -- the time spent in the care and feeding of computers, networks, and software.

And at the same time, a new category of software is emerging, software intended to augment social systems. Not to change the company inadvertently, like email did, when the electronic analog of interoffice mail became something else, grew into something else by changing the way people communicated, and led a change in the structure of the company. No, this generation of software is intentional, designed from the start to guide human behaviour into new paths and patterns, to counter prevailing ways of interaction. I call these social tools: software intended to shape business culture.

1999

Message

5

The Expertise Problem

As one of the best motives for social tooling, consider the local knowledge surrounding business expertise. Who in your business knows about international customs duties? What is the password for the demo? Who has worked with XYZ Corporation in Nashville, and why don't they want to buy our flagship product? In every business, these kinds of questions are being asked daily, and have since forever. But today, things are getting harder.

My partners at Lighthouse Consulting were involved in a major knowledge management project at Platinum Software, a company confronted with serious social strain. Why? Prior to their acquisition by Computer Associates (which has probably not decreased the strain) Platinum was acquiring a company per week. I've written several times about the Jaguar project before, which was a tremendous success, however measured, and which was intended to counter the problems that arise in sales and marketing of software products in the face of this scale of acquisition.

Consider the general issue of expertise, not just the area of sales and marketing. In Platinum during that explosion of growth all sorts of social systems were being dropped, disrupted, reworked, and rediscovered. And the same holds true in other firms, as well. I know a colleague who is working in a large direct marketing firm where some departments experience more than 100% turnover per year! How can the know-how and memory of the firm be conserved in the context of such braindrain?

In these two apparently opposite cases -- Platinum's enormous growth, through acquisition and the direct marketing firm's inordinately high turnover, we find the same social result: people having little idea of where to turn -- who to ask -- for answers.

The Wrong Solution to the Right Problem

I have introduced The Expertise Problem in a lot of presentations and workshops, and invited responses. The invariably most common solution offered is just plain wrong. 'Create a database,' the response goes, 'capturing who knows what, and allow everyone access to it -- publish it on the web, or print up a sophisticated company yellow pages.' Why is it wrong, you may ask (especially if the database approach immediately occurred to you when I posed the problem). It is wrong because such a database -- even if correct in some limited way at the outset -- will always be out-of-date. Of course, getting it to be correct is exactly the problem that the company is confronted with in the first place. Also, the database approach is static, and does not really reflect how communities maintain this sort of knowledge.

The Right Answer: Abuzz Beehive

Expertise is one of the many critical themes of business communication, like negotiation, proposition, and other ways that people communicate about knowledge. Communication in business today does not happen through databases, but instead, overwhelmingly through email. So the right answer to the Expertise Problem is "email."

The clever folks at Abuzz, like Sean Kutz (see Dialog) have [\[go to page 6\]](#)

The big story is that the global computer network is a enormous chat room, enabling us to collaborate in unexpected, complex, and novel ways.

Expertise is one of the many critical themes of business communication, like negotiation, proposition, and other ways that people communicate about knowledge. Communication in business today does not happen through databases, but instead, overwhelmingly through email. So the right answer to the Expertise Problem is "email."

1999

5

Message

Dialog with Sean Kutz, CTO, Abuzz

SB: Based on your background in philosophy and computer science, I wonder if founding Abuzz was motivated by philosophical principles?

SK: I have always been interested in parts and wholes. But thinking about a company as an organization, like when we say this company did something dumb or something intelligent, we know really that someone in the management made a decision to do it, even though we talk about the whole company. In a sense that is true: the company is always thinking, but not doing it any better, and a lot of times a lot worse than the individual members.

SB: So you are talking about the notion of emerging value, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts?

SK: The problem is the sum... right now the whole is much less than the sum of the parts. **However intelligent a company is, it is going to be a lot less intelligent than a person.** Think of all the things that people have to do. Abuzz has appeared so early in the evolution of companies that we are useful.

SB: So how does Beehive fit into this? Is Beehive a system that helps companies be smart? Is that part of what it does?

SK: What Beehive allows is to be able to get at people's goals and also at how other people can fulfill them, so in a sense it is sort of a throwback to a more basic type of economy where people are directly connected. This person provides this type of expertise, this person another.

SB: This expertise is for a purpose, so what you are saying is Beehive helps to align the various purposes of the individuals.

SK: Yes, without having to abstract away into a report, without always having to have a predetermined system that you deal in. It allows people to deal with each other directly and allows some abstractions but trying to eliminate needless abstraction.

SB: **Beehive is a medium to communicate, not an artifact that provides a model of interaction.**

SK: That is a very good way of putting it, you must be a journalist.

SB: Among other things.

SK: Well then you must know about media. Yes, it is very much a medium -- somewhere in-between a mass medium and a very individualized one. It is sort of a hybrid. **Both interpersonal, and anonymous:** you are looking for someone who can answer this question, and not Joe in particular, even though it might be Joe who answers it. The other thing is once you establish a relationship, Beehive can help keep track of it and keep it correlated when you need new things. Maybe you can extend those old relationships. But the basic thing is to be able to establish new relationships based on what people have done in the past. You know, other relationships they have with other people.

SB: **So Beehive is not intended to be machine intelligence telling people what to do.** That is an obvious fear. I can imagine many would say "I'm not going to do things because a machine tells me to."

SK: That is something that is very important to us. **The only intelligent part of the system are the people using it, so in that sense too it is a medium. It allows them to express organization. It will record the organizing actions and not just sort of transmit their contents.** So they are saying I don't like this, I like that. It is letting them organize their world. In a small sense it is organizing their in-box. This is the type of thing I would like to see. It's a big thing that we would like to get more of in Beehive, is for a user to be able to click on any message they receive and Oh why did I get that and that should justify itself. Then the user should be able to say this was a stupid reason to send me something, don't send me something for this reason again, or this was a good reason. So they take one more step in transparency. The goal is to give people control when they interact with each other. Given that it is a business situation they are not just interacting because they are friends, it's because they want something that is mutually fulfilling. It is a tool to allow people to mediate those connections between each other.

SB: Other excesses in the past have caused worry -- systems where people are constantly being monitored. There is always the possibility that when Big Brother is watching you can be evaluated negatively, for example, a negative evaluation for



1999

Message

5

not responding quickly enough.

SK: I think it varies. There is a certain sort of culture that seems to fit well with Beehive, and we have learned what that culture is. **How people feel about being monitored in their professional performance has a lot to do with whether they think it is really relevant.** You might not like people reading your e-mails because quite frankly a lot of your e-mails have no relationship to your work. If you are a musician you are quite happy to be monitored, every action to be monitored when you are performing, that is your job. I think that as a knowledge worker you must be willing to be monitored for your performance, and the key is that **people have to trust the system to monitor what is relevant.** That is not everything that they do. The system is sending messages that are work related, and people can respond in their work capacity and also control their interactions with each other. I think it will be attractive because it allows a record to be kept. Let's say you are an expert in something and everyone knows that. People come to you and you answer their questions but if the manager does not know about it, you will never get any credit for it. Imagine two people are talking in the hall: one of them asks "Can you answer a question for me?" and the other says "Fine, but I would really appreciate it if you ask me that through Beehive." People want to be recognized for doing their job, and to have a record kept.



SB: **Knowledge is a network like the internet, and Gilder pointed out that the value of a network rises with the number of nodes connected.** Is that one of your driving notions? The larger the group of people sharing expertise the more the value of the medium?

SK: In a certain sense. Whenever you get more people, given some basic facts about them, Beehive will work better than with less people. But it is not just sheer numbers, although that is an important driver. Given that people are doing something productive and if they are already doing something productive Beehive is going to allow them to do it better. **The critical factor is not number of people, but the number of people that potentially need to find each other in order to get their work done.** That is also one reason we have started out thinking of enterprises as an incubator for Beehive, because there are a lot more people out on the Internet in general, but it is lot sparser marketing wise, it is a harder puzzle. Inside an organization, especially a fairly flat organization that has to change a lot, like a consulting organization, people are working on things all the time that they need other people to help them on. The corporation that is the sponsor of this market so that there is not the problem where either the buyer or the seller, they are both always there.

SB: Is this the next wave of organizational management?

SK: Yes. There is the organization's structure on one side, then the technology on the other side, and I think they are both sort of coming together. **It is the continuation of letting people interact with each other in a way that is closer to what their actual needs are, but still being able to abstract a little bit, so they don't have to only interact with acquaintances.**

SB: The first thing that people automate is what they already do, the way it is done now, so when they pave roads for the first time they pave the roads they already have: cowpaths. Roads designed for people driving two wheeled carts in the mud are all wrong for sports cars. Later on they reroute the roads to avoid all those car crashes.

SK: And invent seat belts too. **Beehive is bringing something new to organizations because it allows them to communicate much more directly on what needs to get done, and not necessarily just using existing structures and practices, but still tied to the point of view of an established community, so it is automating something that already exists.** If you look towards the future there are new things you can do with a medium like Beehive: **It will allow a virtual community to interact where they really wasn't an existing community, but just a common set of needs.** If there wasn't the critical mass to support the existence of a community, now maybe there is.

SB: Simply because of dropping the costs involved?

SK: Yes, the cost of finding people and establishing relationships. **[END]**



1999

5

Message

Realizing that most people in business today would use email as the primary medium for discussing expertise, Abuzz has developed an email-centered service tied into the company's email system, called Beehive.

developed a very smart approach to communicating about expertise. Realizing that most people in business today would use email as the primary medium for discussing expertise, Abuzz has developed an email-centered service tied into the company's email system, called Beehive.

Beehive acts as an intermediary for questions about expertise. For example, when I was receiving a demo of the product, I asked "what analysts track the knowledge management industry?" This question was stuck into a normal email message, and posted. Beehive used its expertise model to forward the message to various folks inside of the company who might know something about the question. Beehive can also compare questions against a database of existing questions and answers.

When Beehive is first installed, an administrator must prime the system with a first-order approximation of the expertise network in the company. This is unlike the database approach, because this is not the end artifact, but just the starting point for an adaptive system approach to constructing and maintaining a working model of the business' expertise.

It turns out that the Abuzz folks are avid users of their own product (what a surprise) and the marketing folks all had numerous contacts to share. There were also some non-marketing folks who monitored the "open" question and offered their recommendations as well. If I had been a real user of Beehive, instead of an outside analyst, I would have rated the responses on several dimensions, such as timeliness, clarity, and utility -- in effect grading the answers.

The screenshot shows the Beehive website interface. At the top left is the Beehive logo. On the left side, there are three buttons: "Respond" (adds your comments), "Leave" (leaves the discussion), and "Forward" (forward question to other people). The main content area displays a "Response from Rob F." with a sub-message: "A comment/answer has been added to the dialog." Below this is a "Question" section with the following details:

- Question:** - see full (with a "view online" link)
- Inquirer:** Shaun C.
- Subject:** I have an insurance question to ask Trinet. Who at Trinet should I ask?
- Body:** ... see full

 The question is dated "Wed May 19 08:48:00 EDT 1999" and includes a link to "http://www.trinetgroup.com" with the text "(Did you know you can do your benefits enrollment online? It's quick & easy.)".

 Below the question are two responses:

- Rob F.:** - in response to | view threaded (Wed May 19 08:48:00 EDT 1999). The response text is: "You can also check out their web site at http://www.trinetgroup.com (Did you know you can do your benefits enrollment online? It's quick & easy.)"
- Maribeth M.:** - in response to | view threaded (Tue May 18 18:00:23 EDT 1999). The response text is: "You can call and ask for the benefit rep for Abuzz's customer service team. Their number is in our directory."

 On the right side of the interface, there are two lists:

- Respondents:** Maribeth M., Rob F.
- Question Sent To:** Maribeth M., Dan D., Jess B., John C., David B., John P., Zak U., Russell N., Rob F.

 At the top right of the interface, there are navigation links: ask, tell, search, you, help.

1999

Message

5

The Ties that Bind: Too Tightly?

Beehive takes these ratings and uses them to strengthen or weaken the links in the expertise network: if Jenna keeps getting good grades for answering marketing questions, she will get more marketing questions. And of course, there is the possibility of determining how 'good' Jenna is at answering queries in general, both in absolute and relative terms.

These grades -- aggregated, anonymous -- can support a virtuous cycle in the firm: those that work diligently to help others should be acknowledged and rewarded. Those who help less, or provide unclear, untimely or unhelpful responses must also be rated, albeit negatively. And there lies the potential area of contention -- does Beehive lead to a mobocracy instead of a meritocracy? The balance to concern is the law of uninvolvedness. In large firms, and in situations where people don't know the people they are rating, and where they have no personal interest, you can expect a reasonable disinterest in rating. One challenge for management is to blunt the potential for abuse through reasoned evaluation of Beehive 'grades.'

I also thought it would be reasonable for Beehive to allow users to rate the questions being asked, if not for timeliness, at least for clarity and utility. Why be penalized for a bad response to a stupid or poorly worded question?

Business Intelligence and the Corporate Bloodstream

Management also has access to the administrative information of the system as a whole. Monitoring the flow of information within email is the next great frontier. Email is where everything that is happening is happening. 99% of everything critical to a business today is in today's email. Abuzz is offering one sort of monitor to stick into the corporate bloodstream: but everything in the bloodstream is important, either as in support of the organism or attacking it.

By tapping into the Beehive, management has a new tool for business intelligence, one that works from the bottom-up, one that aggregates the myriad independent questions across the company. Why are so many people asking about the AR-44 product line this week? Perhaps a competitor has released a white paper slamming it. What questions are being asked that no one knows how to answer? Maybe we need to bring in outside help, or hire people with different sorts of expertise.

The management features of the tool offer these sorts of oversight to the business beehive augmented by Beehive.

The Second Order Effects

The unexpected application of tools in new ways is the proof of their power. In the case of Beehive, a number of interesting social phenomena have started to crop up through the use of the tool that indicate some of the unintended consequences of Beehive use.

Just as in Web chat rooms, open questions in Beehive attract 'lurkers,' those silent listeners who inhabit the fringes of social interchange. Leaving aside

The unexpected application of tools in new ways is the proof of their power. In the case of Beehive, a number of interesting social phenomena have started to crop up through the use of the tool that indicate some of the unintended consequences of Beehive use.

Monitoring the flow of information within email is the next great frontier. Email is where everything that is happening is happening. 99% of everything critical to a business today is in today's email. Abuzz is offering one sort of monitor to stick into the corporate bloodstream: but everything in the bloodstream is important, either as in support of the organism or attacking it.

1999

5

Message

I expect that the largest impact of Beehive will be seen in the support of New York Times communities of interest: communities brought together around common interests and purpose through Beehive's ability to link those with questions to those with answers.

the psychological and interpersonal parallels with chat rooms, for a moment, lurkers in the Beehive setting seem to be intent on learning. By 'listening in' on the interchanges of others regarding elements of expertise, the lurker may gain information critically important to the company and perhaps to the job.

On the other hand, it is exactly this sort of participation that can lead to managerial questions about the Beehive's cost-cutting benefits: if the ostensible goal was to save time through better matching of questions with answers then all these hangers-on are cutting into the savings, aren't they? Well, of course in a way they are, but on the other hand, they are learning in a way that was previously impossible.

Close

When I was visiting Abuzz, and I inquired about future direction (with particular emphasis on the Web), they were chillingly quiet. I pointed out that the best value proposition for Beehive is not strictly within the firm, but across the marketplace. I mentioned a number of expertise-oriented web services I am involved in (Advoco.com, Gigaweb, Cutter), and suggested that that would seem an obvious next step, or even a better first step.

Circumstances have caught up with me. For a number of reasons -- a vacation, press of other projects, departure of a partner -- I was somewhat delayed in this write-up of Beehive. Just a week ago, as I was returning to the material to complete the write-up, I learned that Abuzz had been acquired by the **Times Company** (the publishers of the **New York Times**).

Abuzz Beehive will no longer be marketed as software-in-a-box, as an enterprise solution, but instead, management informs me "will be the technology that powers the communities of interest that have formed around The New York Times brand. Beehive is the connection, The New York Times is the destination. Beehive is a cornerstone in Times Company Digital's strategy to develop a global knowledge network."

The initial integration of Beehive into the Times "global knowledge network" will be visible at the the Times WineToday.com site at the end of August. I expect that the largest impact of Beehive will be seen in the support of New York Times communities of interest: communities brought together around common interests and purpose through Beehive's ability to link those with questions to those with answers. And of course, the commercial link between expertise and client need is an obvious one, and suggests the course that consulting may be taking in the next few years.

Coordinates

Christine Mohan
Abuzz
86 Sherman Street
Cambridge, MA 02140
617.499.0074
fax 617.497.6382
christinemohan@abuzz.com