

## SOCIAL ERP – IS IT ALL HYPE?

*Dan Roberts asks whether building Facebook into ERP systems is a gimmick, or a serious attempt at information sharing.*



**Dan Roberts: crucial competitive advantage**

There has been a lot of talk over the past weeks and months about Enterprise 2.0 or 'Social Business'. In essence, what is being touted is a way to bring the social web experience – Facebook, Twitter and Wikipedia – into the business.

Much of the talk has been around making the user interface 'more like Facebook'. On the face of it, the cynic in me sees the huge popularity and growth in services like Facebook and Twitter and makes the assumption that the enterprise vendors are just trying to get some of the action. But is there more to it than that?

There used to be a saying: "If only Siemens knew what only Siemens knows." No doubt this was used about many big companies. The trouble is that, once companies get beyond a certain size – which is actually quite small – it is almost impossible for the knowledge that resides within that organisation's most critical resource (its people) to be shared amongst everyone that needs to know it.

That's where knowledge management systems come to the fore. As wikis (wiki stands for 'what I know is') – like Wikipedia – are the well-known consumer knowledge repository, companies are starting to use them for their own knowledge management and to discuss ideas within teams.

Internal blogs are also useful for this sort of idea sharing. Using this approach avoids the problem of knowing who has the latest version of a document.

One of the strengths of the internet is the vast amount of information that's out there. Another is the range of products available from vendors you would never have found on the high street.

When you put those strengths together you get the review sites – where you can find out how good these unknown vendors or products are. Social functions such as these are vital to the health of the internet shopping boom.

So shouldn't companies be using these facilities? Not only can they use feedback sites to inform their own purchases, they can also track what customers are saying about their own company and put the problems right.

Companies are also beginning to track their own company and product names on blogging sites like Twitter, so they can keep track of how their company messages are getting out and identify customer service issues.

An important aspect of consumer social networks is information sharing, whether it is your family photos, your latest news or a rant about poor service.

But that very essence of social networking makes it vital for business use. If your employees have the right information at the right time, then they make the best decisions and work more effectively.

Over the next few years these tools will become more embedded into the business applications we all use on a daily basis. Used wisely, these tools can help to cut through the information overload that many companies are struggling with. But they can also increase that information overload if they are implemented poorly.

The companies that find the best way to use those tools will gain a crucial competitive advantage.

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