


Whitepaper: Creating a User-Centric, Digital Workplace Platform





„To connect people and draw out their expertise, today's enterprises need a new understanding of the way people work and collaborate together.“

Stephan Grabmeier, Chief Evangelist, Innovation Evangelists GmbH

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Preface

Well-established studies have shown that the use of social technologies can have dramatic positive effects on measurable performance indicators such as employee satisfaction, retention and productivity, whilst simultaneously breeding an enormous potential for indirect benefits such as corporate innovation.¹ At the same time it is becoming clear, that simple technology-driven approaches and confronting users with multiple individual solutions such as corporate intranets, communication tools, and collaboration systems are not leading to the desired increase in user acceptance, communication and productivity.²

As Oscar Berg states, “The failure of the technology-centric approach to improving knowledge work is the major reason why new concepts such as ‘Digital Workplace’ have reason for existence”.³ It seems that the path to achieving an increase in user productivity and company innovation involves the implementation of two fundamental concepts within a single system: a centralistic platform for the delivery of technology in the form of a single digital workplace, and taking a user-centric approach to focusing the

delivered technology around the needs and use cases of the users and organization being supported. On the basis of this hypothesis, it becomes quickly apparent that the “Digital Workplace” is not a static out-of-the-box, one-type-fits-all, ready-for-success product that can be installed in any company. Rather, it is an interwoven set of tools and application of concepts around defined user needs within a particular organization. Extrapolated against a timeline, it is also plausible to suggest that an fully optimized digital workplace solution has only a transient nature, and either must evolve with changing user needs, maturing company social culture and external economic pressures, or become redundant, and in the extreme case, anti-productive. As such, the saying that “After the project is before the project” is nowhere more relevant than when dealing with digital workplace solutions and highlights that necessity for flexibility in the platform which is being used to deliver technology to the users.

Let’s take a user-centric look at set of core use cases that exist in most organizations.

What is important for me today?

Employees and their tasks don't exist in complete isolation. The organization itself and the broader external market are continually producing events containing a potential impact for the individual. The creation of situational awareness can be a major factor in improving productivity by providing the initial stimulus to initiate a new task, or by providing an employee with task relevant information before the task is completed, allowing an early reaction and possible alternative outcome. User dashboards can address common questions such as:

- Where are my colleagues, and what are they doing?
- How are my projects progressing?
- What is the latest company communication?
- Which external events could influence my tasks?

The key is providing relevant information in the right place at the right time. A classic editorial style intranet obviously has a tremendous disadvantage in this scenario, as intellectually and politically filtered information reaches the user too late and has potentially lost the elements of critical importance. Modern platforms offer functions such as activity streams, live feeds, status updates, tasks, data aggregation over metadata and data

aggregation over actions such as the number of downloads, likes, or user comments. Used correctly, these mechanisms can be highly effective in reducing user isolation by presenting relevant information in a timely manner and creating a rich context within which an employee can be informed effectively. On the other hand, incorrect use of these tools can result in overwhelmed employees and user rejection of the platform. "Too much information", "too much functionality", and "too complex", are all relative terms which need to be set in relation to the digital fitness of the employees involved. Most likely, the employee base is highly heterogeneous encompassing multiple, if not all, generations between the "Baby Boomers" and "Digital Natives". This is where flexibility in the underlying platform is required to gain maximal acceptance. The platform must be flexible enough to simultaneously cater to all groups of differing digital affinity, for example, by offering multiple user profiles of differing complexity together with the corresponding user dashboard templates and varying degrees of possible user personalization. Once employees have past the acceptance phase, profile-switching should be possible to allow users to grow in accordance with their own perceived digital competency.



Where can I find it?

Employees challenged with performing a task are often faced with the problem of not being able to find the relevant information in a timely manner, often resulting in decisions being made on the basis of incomplete and inadequate information. A study showing that employees use between 0.5 and 2 hours of their working day to locate information² points to a situation of routine productivity loss caused not only by ineffective searching, but also by recreating information that principally exists but cannot be found, the clarification of multiple differing versions of same material and handling issues such as reformatting and editing information from multiple sources.⁴

Digital workplace solutions can be used to great effect to aggregate information from multiple sources, provided the platform has the flexibility to integrate an enterprise search engine and support federated search mechanisms

over multiple systems. Highly-integrated solutions based on a portal servers which directly contain multiple facets of the digital workplace such as document management, wikis, knowledge bases, and eLearning together with common metadata concepts such as taxonomies have a distinct advantage over solutions composed of individual systems tied together with a search engine. The advantage stems largely from the ability to use common metadata over multiple asset types such as documents, web-contents, wiki pages, comments, tasks, sites and users. Common metadata not only make searching and the post search filtering of search results more effective, they also expand the scope of concepts such as tag clouds and user subscriptions to feeds based on metadata definitions which additionally allow a preemptive presentation of relevant content to employees prior to an search being actively triggered.



Who can help me today?

If an employee can't find particular information, then finding someone who could help is the next most effective step. The acceptance of the fact that an ideal situation in which all employees proactively document their knowledge will never completely exist highlights the need for a core functionality built around finding people and their skills.

The user profile is the classic tool used to facilitate people discovery. Over and above the standard user attributes (e.g., photo, name, qualifications, telephone number, and addresses), useful user profiles should contain information concerning the activities of the user within the system and their memberships in particular interest groups. More advanced solutions that are a little more forward-thinking give the employee the personal space and flexibility to expand their profile and represent themselves fully within the workplace by allowing the use of concepts such as personal blogging, self-tagging with metadata, and personal descriptions of their skills, projects, and interests.

How can we work together?

Whether it involves a single task or an entire project, there are many business aspects that are better solved by a group of people than a single employee. Beyond the seamless integration of tools such as chat and video conferencing for the transient exchange of information, digital workplace solutions can be pivotal in allowing geographically-distributed employees to work together over longer time periods. Virtual collaboration rooms can provide closed dynamic spaces for projects. Such rooms should provide the concerned project or community with a wide palette of tools such as document management, task management, wiki and events, meetings and calendar functionality to encourage the concurrent efforts from a team towards a particular goal in a transparent manner. It should go without saying that higher level features such as activities, metadata and search also apply in this situation. The underlying platform should be flexible enough to allow users to create new collaboration rooms based on templates. Ideally, it would also allow the collaboration rooms to be self-administrating in such that the project or community manager can assume the role of the local administrator and be responsible for all members and content in context of the project room.

How do we stay in contact?

Excluding email, digital workplace solutions are capable of providing more than enough methods for synchronous and asynchronous communication in one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many scenarios. Alerting, live chat, private messaging and conferencing are just some of the alternatives.

The initial establishment of contact between two or more employees is usually an active needs or interest-driven event. Staying in contact with other employees using the previously mentioned classical methods is also an active process and requires constant repeated effort measurable in time units. In the modern short-lived world with ever-changing interests, needs and demands, the workplace

platform should be leveraged to keep employees in contact even after the initial needs have been satisfied.

Implicit communication methods in which employees indirectly communicate to their environment by means of their actions can be employed to promote communication within the workplace without relying on active participation on behalf of the employee. When social concepts such as “followers” and “friends” are actively used within the workplace, components such as user comments, “like” and “upload” buttons can be exploited as senders and activity streams (used as receivers) to proactively inform employees about events in their business social environment by the workplace system itself.



The need for change

This paper has discussed five primary use cases for digital workplace solutions from a user-centric viewpoint. However, dictated by the requirement to put the user first, the exact implementation of these use cases is most likely unique for every organization.

Employee needs are not only defined by the job description of the employee, but also by the process and social maturity of the organization itself and greater socioeconomic influences of the marketplace. Assuming volatile external factors and a healthy implementation of continuous improvement processes within an organization, the primary user needs catered-to by a workplace solution are in a state of dynamic change. As such, fine tuning the digital workplace for a particular organization is an odyssey with a mandate valid as long the organization exists.



Flexibility in the technological platform is mandatory

As we've established, building a digital workplace solution isn't a single project, but rather an iterative process of providing and refining useful services and capabilities to your employees. As a decision maker, you face the situation of having to decide a technological platform today without knowing what you need tomorrow.

Good questions to pose when choosing a platform are:

- Is the product proprietary or open source?
- Does the product use standard, accepted and well-understood technology?
- Is the product designed to be extended?
- Does the product use standard interfaces?
- Are you allowed to modify the product?
- Are extensions or modifications to the product affordable?
- Is the product supported by a large and active community?
- Is the product scalable, and can the product grow with your organization?

When making a decision over the technological basis for a workplace solution, your best asset is flexibility – the ability to do something tomorrow that you didn't plan today.

1. Pentland, Alex: "How Social Networks Network Best" Harvard Business Review, 02.2009
2. IDC: Hidden Costs of Information Work: A Progress Report, 05.2009
3. McKinsey Global Institute: The social economy: Unlocking value and productivity through social technologies, 07.2012
4. Neochange: 2012 Adoption Insight Report, www.neochange.com

“In order to stay competitive, today's enterprises must take the leap towards networked infrastructures.”

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Company Profile

PRODYNA is an innovative IT consultancy specialized on the topic of digital business. We consult companies through the processes of digital business transformation, and develop the custom software applications and systems required by your company to remain competitive in the age of the customer.

Founded in 1991, with a corporate headquarters in Frankfurt am Main, seven regional offices in Germany and organizations in Switzerland, Austria and Serbia, PRODYNA is a privately held, and internationally active company with currently 260 employees.

The name PRODYNA stands for PROfessional and DYNAmic. Although most people think and act in the time unit “project”, the path to long term success is much longer. PRODYNA considers it extremely important to guarantee continuity to its customers. Since our capital is the knowledge and experience of our consultants, PRODYNA makes great investments in the further education, certification, and long term retention of its employees. Furthering these efforts, PRODYNA works – in distinction to our competitors – exclusively with permanent employees and frowns upon the use of freelancers.

The age of the customer demands agility and a short time to delivery. Our size allows PRODYNA to act quickly and personally towards the fulfilment of your needs. We have fast internal processes, we know each other, and we know who has the required skills for your project.

Customer obsession on the side of PRODYNA, and satisfaction on the side of the customer, are the required conditions for successful relationships. With great transparency and clear communication, PRODYNA works intensively towards strengthening the trust relationship with its customers. This philosophy, combined with a firm belief in continuous improvement has proven to be immensely successful for PRODYNA.

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