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Atos "No Email" Initiative Provides Valuable Lessons on Driving Big Change Through Social Collaboration

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VIEW SUMMARY

The €8.6 billion professional services firm Atos is making big investments to transform the collaborative culture of its greater than 76,000-person company. Driving such a big change effort requires unflinching leadership commitment, retooling management and exceptional storytelling.

Overview

Key Challenges

Changing corporate collaborative culture first is novel and risky, requiring special attention to justification.

Sense-of-urgency issues, such as "no email," can stimulate social collaboration change.

Big social collaboration change demands big commitment and big investment.

Collecting a portfolio of success stories isn't optional and isn't trivial.

Recommendations

IT and business leader change agents pursuing a big change effort like collaborative culture transformation need to:

Explicitly prepare managers, and make them responsible for translating the high-level social collaboration objectives into terms that resonate with individual employees.

When moving to a culture of social collaboration, build and execute a clear plan on where to move different forms of communication and collaboration. Invest in tracking activity results to direct program and management attention to lagging engagement.

Examine and document the leadership commitment required for success, and pursue a social collaboration initiative only after leadership understands and willingly embraces that responsibility. The bigger the change, the bigger the commitment.

Use a strong portfolio of success stories as the core of a communications campaign to gain attention, reward key participants, educate on what success means, create a vision for how things could be and gain cultural momentum.

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Introduction

Employee productivity is ever-present in the minds of senior executives. Social collaboration is gaining mind share as a means for increasing employee engagement.¹ Additionally, discussions of email overload and the accompanying fatigue and productivity drain continue. The rise of social collaboration and sentiment on email overload are driving senior business leaders to consider how to gain productivity benefits by changing how the organization communicates and collaborates.² And they are asking IT and business change agents tough questions on how to effect this transformation. IT and business change agents struggle to provide answers that inspire appropriate and impactful action. An examination of Atos' recent Zero email initiative sheds a bright light on the no-email approach and provides insights on driving a big change in organizational operations through social collaboration.

In 2011, Thierry Breton, the chairman and CEO of Atos, made a public announcement that the >76,000-person company would be internal (employee-to-employee) email-free by the end of 2013.³



EVIDENCE

¹ "Promoting Workplace Agility With the Engagement Initiative"

² "Innovation Insight: No-Email Initiatives Invite Innovation by Attacking Email Inefficiencies"

³ "Atos Origin Sets Out Its Ambition to be a Zero Email Company Within Three Years," Atos Press Release, 7 February 2011

⁴ "Atos announcement of 2013 financial results," 19 February 2014

⁵ Meeting between author and Atos CEO and chairman, Thierry Breton, on 23 January 2014

⁶ "Unrelenting Business Disruptions Require New Approaches to Driving 'Big Change'"

⁷ "Toolkit: Build a Purpose Road Map as the Foundation for a Social Collaboration Initiative"

⁸ Author meeting with Atos CEO and chairman, Thierry Breton, on 23 January 2014

⁹ Author meetings with Atos leadership on 4 September 2013

¹⁰ A.J. Bradley, "Email Is Anti-Social Part 1: Communication Is Not Collaboration" Gartner, 29 August 2013

¹¹ Author meetings with Atos leadership on 22 January 2014

¹² "Ferrari: Less Email and More Dialogue Between Co-workers," Ferrari Magazine

¹³ "Maverick* Research: Myths and Realities in the Brain-Aware Enterprise"

¹⁴ "Survey Analysis: Use of Social Software in the Workplace Is Prevalent but its Impact Is Hard to Quantify"

¹⁵ M. Healey, "Why Enterprise Social Networking Falls Short," InformationWeek, 28 February 2013

¹⁶ Atos leadership completed a factual review of this research in May 2014.

¹⁷ Author interviews with several Atos community leaders on 23 January 2014

¹⁸ "Using storytelling to change behavior," Melcrum

NOTE 1

ATOS ADOPTION/ACTIVITY RESULTS

>74,000 enterprise social network users
More than 7,446 communities created (n = members)

7,145 small (n<200 members)

250 medium (200<n<1,000)

46 large (1000<n>5,000)

10 extra-large (n>5,000)

>15,000 employees posting at least once per week

>35,000 employees viewing 1.9 million pages per month (as of December 2013)

>15,000 posts by Atos top management in December 2013

NOTE 2

ATOS NO-EMAIL JUSTIFICATION

First, because Atos is a professional services organization, employee productivity is the foundation of business performance. And the business is highly collaborative by nature. The CEO and chairman, Thierry Breton, is relentless with the no-email campaign and believes driving higher productivity and advancing the capabilities of the company's workforce through social collaboration are absolutely critical to its future success.

Atos calls its no-email initiative "Zero email." Despite the campaign's descriptive and controversial titling, eliminating internal email is not Atos' real goal. The campaign kicked off a collaboration cultural transformation intended to shift employee interactions from email communication to enterprise social networking. A culture change toward more effective collaboration is the main thrust targeting the business goal of overall employee and organizational productivity improvement. The aims were big and general, rather than specific and focused. This announcement spurred significant controversy, with Breton facing criticism in the press.

Atos announced some favorable 2013 business results, including a 7.5% operating margin, up from 6.5% in 2012. Free cash flow increased year over year from €267 million to €365 million, earnings per share increased more than 50%,⁴ and selling, general and administrative costs declined from 13% to 10%. CEO Breton credits the Zero email program as a primary contributor to this business success.⁵ Because numerous factors impact overall business success, it is difficult to tie a no-email program directly to corporate performance. In fact, Atos did not achieve zero internal email by the end of 2013. It reduced internal email message traffic by approximately 60%, with an 80% reduction targeted for mid-2014. However, there is evidence of strong social collaboration adoption and numerous success stories that, in aggregate, could have impacted overall corporate performance.

With its no-email initiative, Atos set out to significantly change the way employees interact across the entire organization of >76,000 people spread across 47 countries. A cultural transformation of this kind and magnitude is very rare. The novelty, scope and disruption of this initiative make it a "big change" effort.⁶ Their unique experiences and achievements provide a wealth of valuable information on the practices, investments and results associated with a big change effort to improve employee engagement through social collaboration. Practices we highlight here include:

Changing corporate collaborative culture first is novel and risky, requiring special attention to justification.

Sense-of-urgency issues, such as no email, can stimulate social collaboration change.

Big social collaboration change demands big commitment and big investment.

Collecting a portfolio of success stories isn't optional and isn't trivial.

Analysis

Changing Corporate Collaborative Culture First Is Novel and Risky, Requiring Special Attention to Justification

Attempting broad efforts such as no email to change corporate collaboration culture first, with the expectation that productive and targeted new behaviors will naturally follow, is very rare and high-risk. The broad nature of a no-email approach lacks the specificity needed to define new, collaborative behaviors and to justify why they are necessary. Winning people's hearts and minds is highly challenging, because people won't internalize the need to change or understand how to change. This challenge is exacerbated with no-email initiatives, because for many people, email use is habitual in their daily routines, and for some, it is like an addiction. A general "improve productivity" goal for social collaboration most often leads to a technology-centric approach that suffers severely from poor adoption. The more prevalent and less risky approach is to change culture incrementally, pursuing smaller social collaboration solutions that focus on causes around which people will rally and that target more specific business outcomes.⁷

Unlike a smaller initiative centered on a compelling cause to mobilize a grass-roots movement, broadly empowering employees with social collaboration tools will usually only motivate a small and fragmented group of employees with pent-up collaboration desires. These early adopters need only the opportunity, rather than justification. However, this group of self-starters rarely can bring communities to critical mass and sustain their engagement. Indeed, Atos discovered that participation in pure grass-roots communities was very low. By early 2013, of the 2,800 communities that formed, 2,000 were basically dormant. No-email, big change initiatives by their nature lack tangible motivation at the individual employee level. Justifying participation to the masses requires a different approach based on strong and obvious leadership from senior executives followed by managers who compel participation at lower levels in the organization. In short, the lack of grass-roots appeal needs strong counteraction from leadership and management.

A tie to overall business outcomes is critical as a "big picture" goal. With Atos, the CEO and chairman, Breton, is relentless with Zero email. He stated, "We really had no choice but to make this investment. We needed to dramatically improve the productivity of our workforce without downsizing or outsourcing."⁸ He doesn't waiver from his focus on the campaign's success and dedicates 15% of his weekly executive committee meeting to its progress. It is crucial that senior leadership clearly and repeatedly articulate that the business outcome warrants the disruption of the big change effort. Notice in the case of Atos that the CEO took the overall business goal to a more employee personal level with "no downsizing or outsourcing" message. Since the tie to business outcomes stops at a high level, more justification is needed. The big-picture goal sets the stage for lower-level actions.

Atos leadership tracked many levers that might impact adoption, such as training on the social collaboration technology, grass-roots leadership and corporate communications efforts, but found that leadership and management involvement was the only lever that significantly moved employee engagement. In their adoption studies, they found a strong correlation between adoption and active Global Business Unit (GBU) management and leadership involvement, especially active GBU CEO support.⁹ Successful managers are instrumental in translating the overall value of the program into terms that resonate with individual employees. If this link is missing, so is employee adoption. To change the work habits of their >76,000 employees, Atos spent extra attention on adjusting the attitudes and behaviors of more than 5,000 managers and leaders. This counters a common belief that social collaboration doesn't need top-down leadership, but thrives primarily from a grass-roots groundswell.

Atos made substantial investments to gain leadership and management attention and garner their support. They tied performance evaluations and bonus structures to the initiative. In 2013, 10% of a top 700 leader's bonus was tied to his or her no-email campaign performance.⁸ In the beginning of 2014, Atos established five Community Vibrancy Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for its leaders and managers, including:

Second, it intends to offer a set of professional services for helping clients become highly collaborative organizations. So it believes success with its Zero email campaign will give it a competitive advantage in sales and delivery, because the company has done it.

Third, it purchased the enterprise social networking/collaboration platform blueKiwi to use internally and offer externally as a product. Atos believes that using blueKiwi for its internal no-email campaign effort will forge the product under an intense fire and provide it with a differentiated story against competing platforms.

1. Continuity (member visits trending per day/month/quarter)
2. Initiative (members originating posts trending per day/month/quarter)
3. Engagement (members commenting on posts by others trending per day/month/quarter)
4. Reaction (member responses/posts trending per day/month/quarter)
5. Impact (member views/post trending per day/month/quarter)

Again, bonus incentives are applied. Leaders who achieve three out of five KPIs get a 100% bonus; those with four or more out of five get 130% of bonus. And the next step for recalcitrant leaders is removal from the leadership ranks. As additional incentive, Atos opened up equity ownership of blueKiwi to its management ranks.

By gaining management engagement, senior leaders are delegating employee-level justification to individual managers who interact more frequently at team or one-on-one levels. Managers are expected to translate the general aspects of a broad culture change effort into specifics that will resonate with individual employees. Managers are often not prepared to meet this expectation and will need assistance.

Recommended Actions:

Don't pursue a big change effort, such as transforming collaborative culture, without an explicit and well-articulated overall corporate business outcome that appeals to all levels of the organization and that justifies the expected investment and risk.

Gain leadership management and attention by directly tying results of the effort to their performance evaluation and rewards.

Explicitly make managers responsible for translating the high-level objectives into terms that resonate with individual employees and prepare them for this responsibility.

If the actions above are not achievable, then take a more stepwise approach centered on smaller, purposeful social collaboration solutions targeted at specific business outcomes.

Sense-of-Urgency Issues, Such as No Email, Can Stimulate Social Collaboration Change

Email reduction is not a goal in and of itself. It isn't even a means to an end. The real challenge is in moving collaboration activities out of email and into a more suitable environment. Most organizations that succeed at social collaboration are effective, either intentionally or unintentionally, at relocating select collaboration out of email to a more social channel. However, since email communication is entrenched in most organizations, it can be a significant barrier to social collaboration.¹⁰

Overcoming large barriers to change sometimes requires dramatic actions. A no-email campaign's primary purpose is to create a sense of urgency. It sends the message that leadership is removing an old way of communicating to make way for a new approach. Indeed, Atos is rallying around no email, but eliminating email is not its target objective. Atos is using its campaign more for its hot-button marketing power — both internal and external to the company. CEO and chairman, Breton, is trying to mitigate email as a barrier to change. And by announcing the Zero email initiative to the world, he is sending a clear message to the organization that there is no going back.

There certainly are risks to dramatic actions like no email. One is keeping leadership pursuing the actual goal. If leaders mistake no email as the goal, then management decisions, actions, measures and reactions that serve the elimination of email can detract from or even subvert the true objective. And many may consider the effort a failure if email is not entirely eliminated. Plus, even if email is eliminated, many will question whether that success helped or hindered the overall organizational performance. It is tricky to ensure that no email is used as an effective motivator while making sure the organization achieves the real goal of improving employee engagement and driving higher productivity through social collaboration.

Atos did not achieve zero internal email by the end of 2013. But it did significantly shift employee interactions out of email and into social collaboration. The average number of internal emails per mailbox per week dropped from 100 per mailbox per week in 2011 to fewer than 40 per mailbox per week by the end of 2013, for a more than 60% reduction. Atos now has more than 74,000 employees in blueKiwi participating in more than 7,446 communities, posting approximately 300,000 times per month and viewing almost 2 million pages per month.¹¹ See Note 1 for more activity results. Atos tracks email reduction in response to its no-email campaign, but it is the measures and progress on employee social collaboration engagement that determine how it makes decisions and investments.

Another significant risk of an overemphasis on reducing email arises if employee interactions migrate to a less cost-effective channel. Atos is actively trying to shift email interactions to instant messaging.⁹ In the same vein, Ferrari leadership announced email restrictions to drive more interactions to the telephone or face to face.¹² We caution clients against moving communications from asynchronous channels, such as email (and social collaboration), to synchronous channels, such as instant messaging and telephone, especially if the goal is employee productivity improvement. These interruption-driven channels should be reserved for time-sensitive communications only, or employee productivity and job satisfaction will decline as workers are bombarded with distractions.¹³

Recommended Actions:

Although no email may be inappropriate for your change initiative, it is still important to find and use a sense-of-urgency issue to assist in motivating change.

When executing on the change initiative, ensure that decisions and actions are directed at achieving the real goals and not the sense-of-urgency issue.

When moving to a culture of social collaboration, build and execute a clear plan on where to move different forms of communication and collaboration. Invest in tracking activity results to direct program and management attention to lagging engagement.

Build a communication strategy that, over time, de-emphasizes sense-of-urgency messaging, such as no email, in favor of highlighting progress toward the real goals.

Big Social Collaboration Change Demands Big Commitment and Big

Investment

Affecting a big change to the organizational collaborative culture with a no-email initiative is very high risk, and mitigating that risk requires an unfailing commitment from senior leadership and a hefty investment. Atos leadership, recognizing that they are facing a big change, has that leadership commitment and is making prodigious investments. Based on Gartner client interactions, we estimate that Atos' investment is well over 500 times what is usual for most organizations pursuing social collaboration. As a professional services organization with designs to sell social collaboration services and technologies, Atos is in a unique situation that offers stronger justification for assuming the risks and investments of a no-email culture transformation (see Note 2). It is Gartner's position that the vast majority of business leaders will not be willing to assume the risks of no email or invest as necessary. However, even social collaboration initiatives of much smaller scope require an investment commensurate with the change involved. This may sound obvious, but common sentiments persist that social media initiatives are low-cost. The tendency is to focus on minimizing technology platform costs, rather than on balancing the costs of changing the way people work against the value of resulting business outcomes.¹⁴ This creates a chronic underinvestment scenario and is a leading cause of social collaboration's failure to deliver meaningful business value.¹⁵

Considering the transformational change Atos is pursuing, it is illuminating to consider the extent of its investment in technologies, process and people.

In moving communication and collaboration traffic away from email, Atos purchased the blueKiwi social collaboration platform as its new destination for employee interactions. It is very unusual, and most often inadvisable, for an organization to buy a software company to improve employee productivity. But ownership gives them full control over the technology environment, thus mitigating the risk of dependency on an external software provider. And as mentioned previously, the purchase also gives them a new product in its offering portfolio.

Another interesting and unique Atos effort was an 18-month-long process modification program to eliminate autogenerated email from Atos processes. In this effort, more than 200 Atos processes were certified email-free. It ties almost one-third of its overall email reduction to this program. Atos leadership feels this early program was critical to winning the hearts and minds of the workforce, because it showed a serious corporate commitment from the start.

Atos invested heavily in its no-email program staffing, with an average of:

- >8 full-time equivalents per year for program management
- A >4-person team of trainers
- >10 full-time community portfolio managers
- >4,800 part-time, trained community leaders¹⁶

To prepare its workers and managers for this major transition, Atos invested significantly in a communications, recognition and training programs:

An upfront, detailed examination of corporate email distribution lists and email traffic to understand the nature of company communications to help ensure that the shift to social collaboration reflected the current communities and existing social relationships.

An extensive company training effort on social collaboration technologies and new ways to foster collaboration, including a program dedicated specifically to the >5,000 managers.

A practice to engage dormant users through a phone call campaign, with leaders and managers reaching out with a direct invitation to participate and asking questions on why engagement isn't happening. The CEO, Breton, makes regular calls himself to several levels of his leadership ranks.

The Practical Atos Collaboration Experience (PACE) program employee training workshop and card game.

Efforts to capture business success stories — showing how social collaboration will save time. This time can be invested in more-direct collaboration with customers, more training and fewer hours worked.

Identified and recognized publicly a set of "lighthouse communities" that represent what success looks like and serve as examples to others.

A "Journey to Zero" employee channel, which is an open blueKiwi community for employee contributions, testimonials, success stories and questions.

Used a "Zero Hero" viral campaign to recognize significant contributors and drive further engagement.

An email Addict Anonymous (eAA) campaign with real users' testimonials and feedback describing their addictive email behaviors and how they freed themselves.

"Zero Email Day" local events to periodically give extra pushes to move interactions out of email and into blueKiwi.

Continuous messages to set the employee expectation for a better workplace experience.

Recommended Actions:

Leadership commitment and appropriate investment is required for a social collaboration initiative of any significance. Without it, the effort is set up for failure. IT and business leader change agents in organizations pursuing social collaboration initiatives or no-email efforts should:

Strongly caution business leaders on the substantial investment required to pursue a big change effort like no email, and help them determine whether the business outcome is worth it.

Estimate the costs, create a business justification and get the investment required for social collaboration success, even when the effort is not nearly as grand as no email.

Examine and document the leadership commitment required for success, and pursue a social collaboration initiative only after leadership understands and willingly embraces that responsibility. The bigger the change, the bigger the commitment.

Collecting a Portfolio of Success Stories Isn't Optional and Isn't Trivial

Because Atos' no-email initiative is an attempt at a broad culture change, it is not possible to call it an overall success or failure, since it will be years before we know whether the cultural change endures. Because so many different elements factor into an organization's overall business performance, it is difficult to directly tie a culture's first approach, such as no email, to tangible business results and nearly impossible to calculate an ROI. Healthy skepticism arises around general claims that attribute that success to no email. A big gap between any broad social collaboration effort and business performance persists, even after adding in significant social collaboration adoption and activity statistics. How did this transfer of interactions from email to social engagement directly lead to better business performance? Without an answer to this question, tying email reduction and social collaboration activity to business performance requires a big leap. A leap that many people, if not most, will not make.

The gap between business results and a broad big change effort like no email can't be fully closed, but adding a portfolio of success stories can begin to illuminate ties. Concrete success stories that articulate new behaviors and improved results help to connect activity statistics with overall business performance. They are the primary means of communicating business value. The larger and stronger the portfolio of success stories, the better the tie with overall business performance. IT and business leader change agents must actively seek out and collect business success stories. Atos spent considerable time and effort accumulating more than 100 success stories from the thousands of bottom-up grassroots-driven collaboration efforts. Here are two stories as examples.¹⁷

LOGO's Group Contract Management Community

Atos, being a global organization, routinely suffers from the customization of customer contracts at local geographies. A proliferation of nonstandard contracts causes trouble downstream and is a significant productivity drain for the Legal Operations Global Office (LOGO) and the local offices. Part of the reason for the proliferation of customization stemmed from limited collaboration. Contracts were basically built at headquarters with some local office collaboration, but not enough to preclude customization. Using blueKiwi, LOGO now hosts the Group Contract Management Community for the development and management of contracts. The community environment allows for a level of mass collaboration among more than 100 people that is not achievable with email. The community collectively creates, adjusts and determines exceptions to contracts. As a result, the new contracts and new contracting processes better serve local operations. So the number of customized, nonstandard contracts has dropped by more than 50%, saving the productivity cost of downstream triage and corrective actions. As an added benefit, relations between LOGO and the local offices have never been better.

Brazil Social Service Desk Community

Atos has service desk organizations in multiple geographies around the world. Its service desk organization in Brazil is using social collaboration to better serve its customers. Prior to the community's creation, an interaction with a customer was limited to communications between that customer and a single service desk agent. With the Social Service Desk, the customer now can reap the benefit of multiple service agents acting together. When interacting with a customer, an agent can post to an activity stream that is monitored by any available agent on the team. This allows the service desk organization to capitalize on any available agent capacity, and several agents can "swarm" to help a fellow agent better serve a customer. As a result, in general, customer issues are resolved 30% faster, with a measurable increase in satisfaction. Another consequence is a happier agent who feels like a valued member of a team. Atos is now implementing this Social Service Desk approach in two French service centers before a more global rollout.

People love stories. But if the success stories aren't compelling and motivating, they can backfire. They can add to the "So what?" sentiment versus alleviating it. Leaders must pay attention to the content and format of these stories and make sure they contain some key elements that both illustrate success and motivate participation. In working with Atos, Gartner created the following structure for short success stories:

- Start with the challenge or purpose as the cause for collaboration.
- Present the old behaviors and resulting difficulties.
- Describe the new behaviors resulting from improved collaboration.
- Give measurable business results.
- Finish with new worker attitudes on the collaborative approach.

Success stories are not only valuable in demonstrating success to leadership, but also invaluable in winning the hearts and minds of employees and in changing their behaviors. At the core of every wildly successful social collaboration effort is a strong cause around which a community rallied and participated to drive change. Tapping into these causes and telling a compelling story of how people worked together to change things and achieve great results personalize collaboration initiatives and enhance meaningfulness. Stories, if used effectively, will be the prime motivator for culture change.¹⁸

Recommended Actions:

- Actively set out to collect success stories by design, with the express intention of using them to demonstrate business results and justify current and future organizational investments in social collaboration.
- Success stories should contain the following elements: challenge, purpose, old behaviors, new behaviors, business results and new attitudes.
- Use a strong portfolio of success stories as the core of a communications campaign to gain attention, reward key participants, educate on what success means, create a vision for how things could be and gain cultural momentum.

Other analysts who have significantly contributed to this research include Jeff Mann, Matt Cain, Mike Gotta and Susan Landry.

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