

Connecting the workforce

How much is too much?

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We all know the addictive power of social media—it is everywhere, used by almost everyone, on almost every device. Just walk down the street of any major city and you'll see most people staring at their phones. (The average person now spends nearly two hours a day on some form of social media.)

This ability to constantly connect and communicate, whether it be by text, video, or email, has become so routine that employees now expect a similar level of interaction at work. In my organization, email has become a "near real-time" media itself, with people often expecting email responses in only a few minutes.

To fulfill this demand, businesses are now using social collaboration tools like Workplace by Facebook, Skype, and others to mimic the consumer experience at work.

We recently studied this and found a huge and rapid adoption of these types of new systems. As our 2018 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends report explains, 70 percent of respondents believe workers will spend more time on collaboration platforms in the future, 69 percent see growth in "work-based social media," and 62 percent predict

an increase in instant messaging.² But how can organizations ensure that collaboration doesn't become too much for employees—creating distractions and burnout rather than improving engagement and productivity?



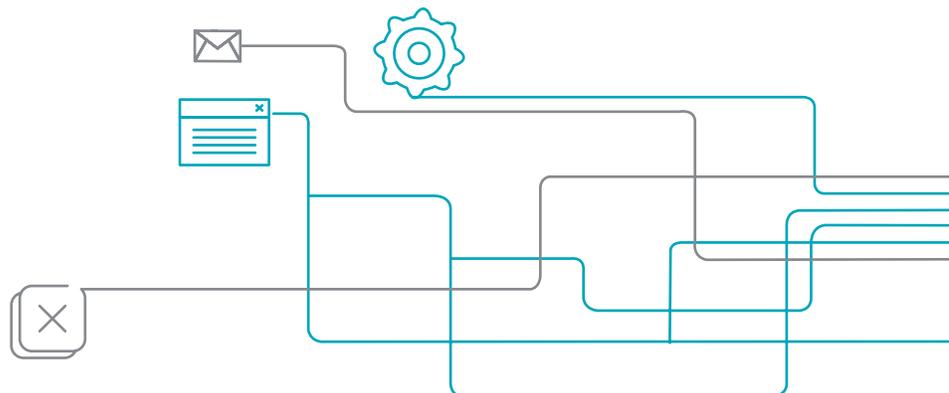
The good

There are lots of good things coming from this trend. Today's workplace is highly diverse, filled with people of varying backgrounds, experience, generations, and skills. These tools help bring them together. People work in multifunctional teams, and these teams, which may be working on product or customer programs, need to communicate in near real time. (We used to

rely on managers to communicate between functional groups—that's considered too slow now.) Thanks to the new tools, people can easily see what others are working on and quickly "join" another team for information.

Teams also need specialized skills that may be located in another group. Through these systems we can seek out the experts, ask them for help, and quickly get their support—without waiting for a manager to "assign a person" to help.

From an HR standpoint, these new systems can be amazing. Suddenly we have engaging platforms for learning, performance management, and other HR processes that are as "fun" to use as consumer systems.³ For the first time in decades, HR tools can plug into these systems and help employees easily and quickly communicate with each other at





work, offer feedback and suggestions on improvements, and give developmental tips to others. One of the new HR vendors actually reads comments being typed on the messaging system and identifies “kudos” or “thank you” comments and suggests that the author give the person more recognition.⁴

How Walmart encourages employees to collaborate

Walmart is changing how it organizes its employees, encouraging them to collaborate across organizational boundaries. “We are purposefully creating ‘collisions’ between associates who work on projects but who might not have worked together previously. That is helping accelerate results because people who have different backgrounds and come from different countries are now working together on common problems.”⁵

– **Jacqui Canney**,
Walmart’s executive
vice president of global people

The not so good

While this increased use of digital communication tools can foster connections and improve communications, it can also create distraction. Many employees now feel they are “ultra-connected” to too many things.⁶ A recent study Deloitte completed with Facebook found that only 14 percent of companies believe their internal processes for collaboration and decision making are working well, and 77 percent believe email is no longer a viable tool for effective communication.⁷ Are we really making work better? Or are our people overwhelmed?

An increased emphasis on distributed decision making and cross-functional collaboration means that managers and employees now spend approximately half of their time working and communicating with others.⁸



14%

of companies believe their internal processes for collaboration and decision making are working well

Unfortunately, they aren’t always deriving value from that time (or adding value for the company). Typically, 20 to 35 percent of value-added collaboration comes from only 3 to 5 percent of employees,⁹ meaning many employees are bogged down by too much collaboration. And productivity is likely suffering as a result. (One vendor I recently talked with shared that the average employee now spends the majority of their time in meetings and online chats, almost eliminating time to think.)

This especially holds true for organizations experiencing change, such as those expanding into new markets or those going through an M&A transaction. Information can come from a variety of sources—emails, meetings, and social communities—which can lead to communication overload, even misunderstanding.

When collaboration tools cause confusion or distraction, they can hurt engagement and output—the exact opposite of the intended effect of increased collaboration. There is an interesting dichotomy in the fact that research conducted by Bersin shows that 38 percent of all leaders feel

38%



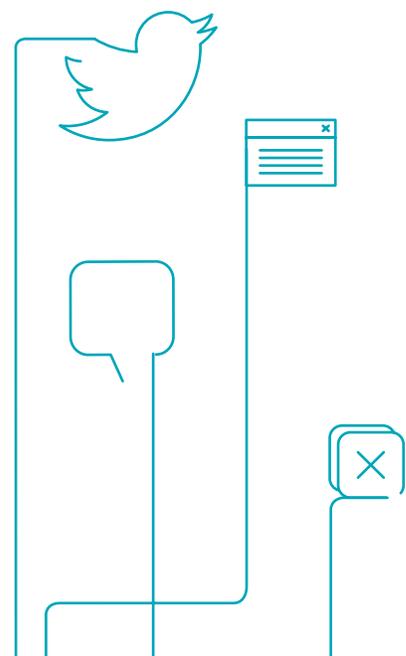
of all leaders feel overwhelmed by collaborative demands

overwhelmed by collaborative demands, while those organizations that are able to manage collaborative overload are 20 percent more likely to excel at innovation.¹⁰ Effective collaboration is overwhelming to leaders yet essential to organizational success.

A solution

It’s clear that effective, convenient collaboration tools are essential in today’s workplace. How do organizations find the right balance in a way that makes the right kind of impact on an organization?

First, leaders need to find ways to standardize technology, integrate these systems, and simplify the process—making it possible for collaboration to be easy and value-additive. One of our clients has an integrated collaboration environment built entirely on G-Suite tools and suggested that the simplicity of the solution dramatically improved engagement. Autodesk saw the same result by standardizing on Slack.



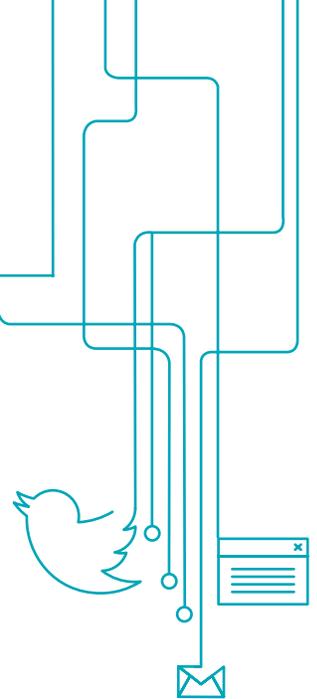
Second, HR has to make the connected experience relevant to the “moments that matter” at work. If I want to open an IT help desk issue, check my vacation balance, process my expense reports, or update my goals, this should be easy to do within the collaboration tools I use. Additionally, by leveraging self-service platforms like Deloitte’s ConnectMe™, leadership is able to share targeted, individualized, and direct messaging that helps employees access information that is specific to their needs, reducing the noise that can come with having so many collaboration tool options available, by streamlining and personalizing the content that employees receive.

Third, HR has to think about its role as “the employee productivity department.” Rather than build new processes that take people away from work, our job is to deliver solutions in the flow of work. One of the clients I met with recently is a large global distributor who uses Salesforce around the world. They took their ERP-driven HR system and built Salesforce widgets that appear in the Salesforce environment, letting people manage their work lives directly from the tools they already use. As I describe in *HR technology disruptions for 2018*,¹¹ the new world of HR technology is all about delivering systems that “make work life better.”

ConnectMe™ is a digital workplace product that helps the workforce access what they need, when and where they need it, by enabling employees to access all of their HR-related information through a personalized dashboard with content specific to their needs.

I am amazed at the innovation I see in workforce management tools today. Systems that enable real-time feedback, analyze employee sentiment, and automatically give managers tips on leadership, better rewards strategies, and career paths are entering the market every day. All these new AI-based systems can add value, but only if we make them easy to use and integrated into the flow of work. This is HR’s new role—serving not only as an advisor and consultant, but also as the spiritual owner of the “irresistible employee experience.”

Let me conclude with one final point. As the world gets more integrated, collaborative, and connected, we all feel a bit of overload, often driven by FOMO (fear of missing out). We as HR and business leaders can teach people how to do less, focus on what matters, and stay true to our own well-being and sense of self. Being hyperconnected is now a way of life; let’s focus on the people and not the technology, and we can create an integrated productive experience at work—one that brings people together, helps people get more done, and leaves people feeling energized when they go home every night.



Endnotes

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