



Saxion University raises productivity with social business software

Social networking with IBM Connections software makes employees more effective

Overview

The need

Saxion University of Applied Sciences needed to increase employee effectiveness through better communications, collaboration and streamlined ability to locate needed expertise.

The solution

The university implemented a program for rolling out IBM® Connections, social software for business that can help people engage with others in the context of critical business processes.

The benefit

By training staff to use Connections software tools for work tasks, Saxion streamlined the meeting process, made it easier to identify and contact experts, and improved employee productivity.

With some 24,000 students and 2,500 staff members, Saxion University of Applied Sciences is one of the largest institutions of higher education in the Netherlands, an important center of expertise at the regional, national and international level. The university has four campuses in the East of the Netherlands, in the Dutch cities of Deventer, Enschede, Hengelo and Apeldoorn.

Exploring the potential of social business

With the world engaged in a digital revolution, Saxion began exploring the potential of social networking software some years ago. A group within the university had already deployed solutions such as IBM Quickr® software for team rooms, IBM Sametime® software for instant messaging and IBM WebSphere® Portal software for disseminating information. But social networking promised more. Students might network with one another and with their teachers to enrich the educational experience, teachers could share knowledge and expertise and learn from their colleagues, and employees could locate expertise and information quickly for answers to questions and faster decision making.

Administrative staff in particular needed technology to improve the way the university conducted meetings. All too often, people shared meeting information over email, with lengthy threads and attached documents making the rounds haphazardly. Sometimes emails omitted key stakeholders, and meetings dragged on as background information, documents, action items and opinions were sorted out face-to-face.



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—Marion Vrieling, project manager for
IBM Connections adoption, Saxion
University of Applied Sciences

Locating expertise across Saxion campuses was likewise inefficient, especially if experts were outside one’s circle of known colleagues. The university relied on a homegrown directory app called Who is Who?, but it was ineffective for searching for people not already known.

There was also a cultural tendency for educators to be protective of their intellectual property. “An educator might sometimes think, ‘Why must I share what I have developed? It’s mine,’” says Marion Vrieling, a project manager at Saxion. “But to thrive in today’s digital world, we must work in more flexible and collaborative ways.” That’s why in 2011 Saxion implemented social networking software for staff as the first step in university wide deployment.

Becoming a “social business”

Saxion chose the IBM Connections solution. The integrated, secure social business platform helps people find and engage with others in the context of business processes to share information and work collaboratively. Key features include activity streams, profiles, blogs, communities, discussion forums and wikis, all easily searchable for experts, documents and knowledge. “We wanted to raise our level of communications and collaboration to a higher level, and that’s exactly what IBM Connections does,” says Rudy Orriens, account manager at Saxion.

Saxion initially made Connections software available to all staff without instruction. There were notable successes: Although the iPhone and Android smartphones are popular with staffers, the IT team lacked expertise with these products. Special-interest communities created in the Connections solution covered these technologies, helping users support one another through community engagement.

Other early adopters experimented with social tools such as Profiles, which let employees describe themselves by citing their skills, experience and areas of expertise; Activities, a task management system that helps groups of people collaborate easily on a task; and Communities, which help enable ad hoc and planned collaboration around a project or area of interest. But after six months, usage was less than anticipated.

Solution components

Software

- IBM® Connections
- IBM Sametime®
- IBM Quickr®
- IBM WebSphere® Portal

IBM Business Partner

- eOffice
-

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—Cora Woltring, program manager, WorX,
Saxion University of Applied Sciences

For one thing, Saxion did not have a culture of open sharing. Some employees shied away from profiles as though they were akin to bragging about achievements. In addition, some were unsure how they could apply social tools to daily tasks.

In response, Saxion teamed with eOffice, an IBM Business Partner in the Netherlands, on a structured program to increase adoption across the university. The program, called WorX, relies on a scenario-based model to train managers on the Connections solution. Further, Saxion is training select functional groups, and in April 2013 it held a 60-workshop event called “Social Business Week” for all staff. Key departments behind the training are IT, human resources (HR) and corporate communications, all advocates for social business.

“In our adoption strategy, we developed many scenarios, or use cases, for Connections,” says Cora Woltring, program manager, WorX at Saxion. “How do we organize a meeting with Connections? How do we profile ourselves? How do we share knowledge and experience with teammates. How do we collaborate? For each scenario, we have a workshop, so users don’t have to learn the whole thing at once. Then managers attending the workshop can train colleagues.” The WorX training program has led some 200 new users to participate in the Connections environment each month.

The scenario for meetings shows the improvement that the Connections solution can bring. An effective meeting starts with the Activities function, which spreads the word to all meeting principals, along with the agenda, related documents, subtasks and action items. Stakeholders can absorb content, share discussions and form opinions before the meeting occurs. This transparency can accelerate decisions by eliminating tedious emails and long sit-downs.

Another scenario addresses employees' reticence to fill out profiles, a must for locating others in the organization. To make it easier, Saxion created a wiki of helpful tips and enlisted a professional photographer and makeup artist for the photos. Thanks to WebSphere Portal software's integration capabilities, all profiles will be published on Saxion's intranet as a corporate directory. Wikis created from Connections software are also published to the intranet.

The university plans to roll out Connections software to its entire community within two to three years. Employees are first, followed by educators and students, all in the interest of improved efficiency, a higher level of transparency and a more engaged and richer educational experience.

Social networking drives productivity and engagement

Although it's still early on the adoption timeline, Saxion has already realized considerable business benefits from using Connections software.

By training staff to use social tools for daily work tasks, Saxion streamlined many business processes. For example, face-to-face meetings move to decisions faster because of online collaboration beforehand, and shorter and fewer sit-downs can reduce travel costs. Activity lists created by experts can document complex tasks for others to follow, such as an HR procedure or software upgrade.

Additionally, communities of interest increased staff productivity. As communities form around new technologies, job functions and initiatives, employees can post questions, share ideas and serve themselves to needed expertise. In IT, for instance, help-desk calls are often answered with, "Look in the community." Discussion forums, wikis and blogs within communities can spark innovation and creativity. And online collaboration has improved the productivity of meetings—as much as 30 percent to 50 percent for some meetings.

Employees are more visible to their colleagues when they are listed in searchable profiles. Staff and students can more easily locate expertise and knowledge while learning about colleagues' talents, achievements and experiences. The result is a more collaborative and transparent culture that will serve the university well.

For more information

To learn more about IBM Connections, IBM Quickr, IBM Sametime and IBM WebSphere Portal software, please contact your IBM marketing representative or IBM Business Partner, or visit the following websites:

- ibm.com/software/lotus/products/connections
- ibm.com/software/products/us/en/lotuquicfami
- ibm.com/software/lotus/sametime
- ibm.com/software/websphere/portal

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