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Introduction

Oracle Social Network was developed as an alternative to existing models of enterprise collaboration: specifically, traditional tool-centered approaches that require the user to break context to communicate. The relatively recent addition of social networking tools, microblogging, walls and activity streams into the enterprise has compounded the problem, creating a third silo in the artificial separation between business, collaboration and social applications today.

The Collaboration Gap

To illustrate the current state of enterprise collaboration, whether with traditional or social tools, and its inherent disadvantages, it is easiest to focus on an example.

Enterprise knowledge workers are invariably engaged in starting, moving forward, or completing a process, assignment or enterprise workflow, including actions that need to be performed on a regular and ongoing basis. This could be preparing to present to a new client, opportunity updating in Sales Forecasting, customer support case resolution in Customer Relationship Management, General Ledger reconciliation in Finance, or bringing a new team member up to speed on a project. Many actions driven from enterprise applications or systems-of-record are inherently collaborative and for any deviation from the ideal process (typically conceptualized when a specific enterprise application was installed and configured), collaboration is required. This collaboration takes place outside of the application, and is typically not recorded completely or in one location. This means that it is not available for later reference to provide understanding as to how the decisions were made, when an exception occurs again, or to identify when a process or policy change may be needed. If it is in an activity stream, entries will have swept by, or as email, pieces of the collaboration are caught in individual inboxes (depending on the whims of the individuals involved.) Social network posts, voice and IM discussions are typically lost forever.

Without a record of the previous and ongoing discussions, it is difficult for participants to garner sufficient context for their deliberations and decisions, especially if they are brought into the process late. At best, a great deal of time is lost educating new stakeholders. At worst, decisions are made without critical information that was available elsewhere in the organization. There is also little in the way of centralized and reliable past experience available to inform decision makers as to how exceptions were resolved previously, leading to repetition of mistakes and inconsistent application of rules across distributed enterprises.
Current software-based collaboration solutions also require that the user (and their partners in collaboration) choose the communication medium (and therefore its membership) in advance – picking up a phone, sending an email, micro-blogging – before determining if that is the appropriate mechanism or group for the discussion. This is exactly counter to an ideal face-to-face interaction where additional people, voice, text, documents, presentations, and whiteboards can be brought to bear as needed or desired. This results in a need to replay or reschedule discussions again and again until the right combination of context, history, tools and people is found.

Enterprises have begun to turn to systems-of-engagement, modeled after consumer social tools, which provide an environment in which their staff willingly spends time and which allow the staff to communicate, participate, find and offer expertise and broaden their networks to enrich and improve both their work deliverables as well as their personal engagement with the business. Traditional systems-of-record reflect the reverse of systems-of-engagement: the individual sees little to no value to themselves through participation, they are of restricted personal interest and are generally treated as a burden to maintain. The ideal is the easy maintenance of system-of-record data, providing managerial and corporate insight, with the communication of valuable changes or updates being efficiently disseminated to appropriate but potentially unknowing individuals throughout the organization. A cohesive, designed interaction between the systems-of-record and engagement offers that potential.

What is needed, then, is a solution for handling enterprise collaboration that reflects the best of consumer style social models, preserves both context and history, allows the widening of the participant set as needed, and provides the appropriate media required for a given communication. It also must preserve the ease and fluidity of email, IM, SMS and stream posts while tightly integrating with enterprise applications and software infrastructure. It must extend into as well as out of systems-of-record, placing the collaboration in-context and equally bringing the key record data of the context into the collaborative application. Otherwise, it risks becoming yet another enterprise workflow application with its own set of exceptions – project management applications are notorious for this failing – or just another “inbox”, a further silo of collaboration data to deal with.
Oracle Social Network

Oracle Social Network addresses the “Collaboration Gap” through stream-based Conversations that are designed to capture information from people, enterprise applications, and business processes to facilitate collaboration between individual users and teams of people both within and across Enterprises. As a system-of-engagement, individuals can collaborate, network, drive decisions and update data, both in the focused pursuit of business objectives as well as in the serendipitous discovery of information and expertise.

With a unique integration of communication, coordination and social functions into a single tool, Oracle Social Network enhances productivity through contextual collaboration, as a standalone tool or embedded into enterprise applications. Extending beyond the organizational boundaries to connect the enterprise with their suppliers, partners and customers, Oracle Social Network enables social networking without the noise.

By socializing of enterprise applications, business processes, and content, Oracle Social Network enables the “social business”. By providing a collaboration and networking platform that connects applications, processes and content to people as well as to each other, Oracle Social Network provides a system that engages the individual rather than being yet another system that demands action. This system allows for cross-enterprise knowledge rather than adding to the silos of lost information.

Through the connection of applications, the system can facilitate a greater understanding regarding the business and the customer. For example, insight into why a Partner is unwilling to begin a new marketing campaign given the challenges they are currently facing with financing and the supply chain. This example connects three very separate applications and very separate lines together through the social fabric.

Four constructs provide the foundations for an individual’s interactions in Oracle Social Network:

1. Conversations;
2. Social objects;
3. Content; and
4. Activity Streams.

Each foundation construct utilizes the others and relies heavily on the core collaborative and real-time capabilities of the application to provide purposeful collaboration across the organization. Meanwhile People and Groups, as the participants at the center of any collaboration or social activity, engage across the core foundation uniting expertise and enabling the flow of information throughout the enterprise.

In Oracle Social Network, collaboration is based on a context that evolves (or gracefully escalates) in form, structure, and content, as dictated by the particular needs of a given collaboration. Within that context, Oracle Social Network provides a rich set of tools to choose from. These tools provide for communication, coordination, content management, organization, decision making, and analysis -- all essential aspects of collaboration. Every collaborative interaction will evolve differently; therefore the
tools utilized will change with each interaction. Some interactions will evolve to represent work spreading over the course of years and involving a large, distributed team, while others may involve a few people and others may not evolve at all. Regardless, all collaborative contexts are built from the same parts, utilize the same concepts, and start the same way. The principle of graceful escalation is that you only use the tools and structure you need; so you only incur the complexity you need.

Most communication has an extremely short shelf life; that is, it may not be very useful a few minutes or even a few hours from now. But as we do not know when communication will need to turn into collaboration, it is best to provide the capabilities, latent and available, and let the Conversation evolve as needed.

Real-time interactions and presence information as a core capability throughout Oracle Social Network gives the participants a sense of social engagement and the application a sense of life that goes beyond even consumer applications today. While real-time communications are being added to networking applications in the form of “chat,” every interaction within Oracle Social Network happens and is reflected without refreshes in real-time. Individuals can see the flow of updates, the volume of participation, their friends’ and colleagues’ focus and the trending groups and themes, but remain able to drive decisions (albeit with reduced latency) with all the required and up-to-date information available.

Conversations
Oracle Social Network's central collaboration object, the Conversation, drives collaborative decision making within businesses.
Oracle Social Network Conversations can evolve in membership. Conversations start with only one participant, but it is easy to add internal and external users to the Conversation when needed, while leveraging the enterprise security and identity solutions. Conversations support participation from closed, secure private messaging to open community, public discussions. New participants will have the full contents of the ongoing Conversation available for review, comment and questioning on arrival, including references to other Conversations and/or external content. Inter-Conversation references also allow smaller teams to break out into private Conversations as needed, while preserving the relationship to the primary Conversation. Conversations can also be publically published, allowing users to find information or groups of interest.

Conversation membership supports bridging securely between enterprises. Whether between partners bidding joint propositions, the supply chain resolving irregularities or agencies collaborating, the seamless transition to inter-enterprise Conversations is critical to supporting modern globalised businesses.

Conversations can escalate (and de-escalate) in medium. Primarily text Conversations (email or IM-like) can become fully recorded voice and video Conversations when needed. Document, annotation, and application collaboration (web conferencing) tools are available to be brought to bear within the Conversation itself as the interaction requires.

Presence indication and notifications can be used to highlight required participation and determine the most appropriate medium on the fly, rather than relying only on scheduled, structured meetings. Participants who are unable to engage in real-time communication can still participate via text, voice notes or video, and can review and annotate the results of any Conversation contents they may have missed. Individuals can choose to receive notifications, updates and digests of Conversations and have the ability to respond back via email.

Conversations can also evolve in structure and capability. Additional tools can be brought to bear within the Conversation itself as gadgets. These are designed to facilitate a user experience that simplifies business process (e.g. updating key fields in CRM), communication (e.g. maps or location data gadgets), or decision making (e.g. voting or approval gadgets). The gadget model itself is extensible, allowing the enterprise to create gadgets for their needs.

Conversation templates allow an enterprise to pre-configure Conversations for a specific use at creation. This will typically vary based on the invoking application, with the structure and tools available in a CRM application Conversation potentially being different than those needed by an ERP application Conversation. The template Conversation can be fixed, limiting tools available or allow for evolution post initial configuration.

Within the Conversation is the existence of the “Track”. The Track is a “soft” container of Conversations that can be created explicitly via user selection or implicitly via tools such as search, tags, social suggestion or intelligent recommendation. Tracks can be private or shared, and a given Conversation can be associated to appear in multiple Tracks. Tracks provide a meaningful way for individuals or groups to collect, organize and share Conversations amongst each other as well as to manage them by their personal preference.
Finally, the Conversation itself can be defined as a specific “type”. The “typing” of a Conversation can include association with a predefined gadget (e.g. connected to a system-of-record) or association with a template (e.g. defining capabilities to be surfaced and the visual representation within the user interfaces). The Social object foundation within Oracle Social Network is an extensible model of business “typed” Conversations designed to connect individuals to items of collaborative interest within their systems-of-record, for example; customers, opportunities, talent goals, supply vendors or custom objects critical to the business. Additionally, typing of a Conversation extends beyond the Social object construct. An obvious example is converting a Conversation into a “Task”, which adds new visualizations, new meta-data such as assignee and due date, and even allows multiple tasks to be tied together using dependencies. Other typing could include questions, ideas and surveys.

Social Objects

Oracle Social Network is designed and developed in conjunction with the design and development of Oracle’s Fusion, Unlimited and Business Unit Application families. The impulse to communicate is often driven by new, or updated, enterprise information within enterprise applications or business processes. It is, however, often fleeting, and impediments to rapid communication will drive users elsewhere. Surfacing collaboration has become critical to every system-of-record and Oracle Social Network capabilities will surface throughout the applications. This, however, represents only one side of the potential value of in-context collaboration.

Social Objects within Oracle Social Network are typed Conversations that are explicitly coupled one-to-one with objects or processes of interest with enterprise applications. They are created programmatically, utilize a pre-built gadget, connect individuals to the object and receive a data-stream of events that are deemed of collaborative importance by the business. Individuals or groups can engage with, follow and post rich messages and content onto the feed and create focused Conversations related to the object. By bringing key fields from the application into the collaboration experience individuals are able to share (or socialize), update and react to system-of-record data from within their system-of-engagement.
Figure 2. Oracle Social Network: Social Objects – CRM Opportunities.

For example, a customer opportunity within Oracle Sales Cloud has a pre-defined Social Object within Oracle Social Network that allows the opportunity team to update CRM and each other. They can also receive valuable system updates like changes of forecast, close date or customer meeting time and create side Conversations to prepare for presentations, update a contract or secure approval for special terms. The underlying Conversation capabilities mean that these collaborative interactions can evolve from simple posts to rich, real-time content-centric collaboration and beyond the opportunity team to include expertise from across or external to the business.

Conversations associated with Social Objects, known as “side Conversations” extend the possible interactions and broaden participation to internal or external non-application users and provide a sophisticated interaction experience, all the while enhancing the data set within the owning application.

The Social Object foundation facilitates purposeful collaboration across organizations with seamless access to information. Paired with in-context integration within enterprise applications, Oracle Social Network becomes the first enterprise platform that allows an organization to easily socialize their applications and processes in a manner designed to deliver a user experience that simplifies business processes and amplifies enterprise application engagement.
Content

At the heart of knowledge-based enterprises is the production, review and publication of content. Whether responding to requests for proposals, searching for the best presentation, designing marketing campaigns, addressing customer problems or writing policies and contracts, the enterprise revolves around collaborative content production. Oracle Social Network provides specific tools to assist with the flow of content, documents, images and other rich media between people and groups to facilitate sharing, rapid and accurate feedback, and reuse. Real-time annotation, versioning, application sharing and in-place editing greatly enhance the productivity of the collaborative content processes that an individual works through every day.

Figure 3. Oracle Social Network: Document Collaboration.

Activity Streams

Oracle Social Network uses the Activity Stream to surface a summary of updates across Conversations, Social Objects and People that are of interest to the individual. The inherent Conversational model means that the Activity Stream is at the outset a well focused stream of updates. The ability to filter and facet the Activity Stream based on a social or business context sharpens the focus still further, allowing the individual to be highly productive while still maintaining the breadth of information flow.
The Activity Stream has been further evolved to a new user experience referred to as the Live Digest. The Live Digest leverages Oracle Social Network’s read/unread capabilities and presents only activity that has not been previously reviewed. The Live Digest is a person centric time slice of activity from which an individual can also quickly respond and engage with other People, Social Objects or Conversations.

Figure 4. Oracle Social Network: Activity Stream.

People & Groups

Within any enterprise collaboration system, individuals and groups define who shares and collaborates on available information, but within the restrictions placed upon them by enterprise security. Social networking systems extended the model, with the individual and latterly the group also representing the focus of the collaboration. This had the effect of flattening organization structures with any individual easily able to follow and engage with any other participant or group.

Oracle Social Network delivers a model designed for the enterprise. People and Groups are designed to support the requirements of enterprise social interactions. Regardless of being in an internal organization or external organization such as partners or customers, Individuals and Groups have access to rich social profiles with feeds, expertise and enterprise information. Individuals and Groups can be discovered, browsed and followed. The connected individual can post messages to their followers, to other individuals and their followers and to groups. Utilizing the same model as Social Objects, individuals can also start secure private Conversations with each other or create side Conversations related to a Group.
With membership of a Conversation, Social Object or Group defined by individuals’ or groups’ participation and each object having a underlying collaboration stream, Oracle Social Network delivers the ease of consumer social networking while supporting the requirements of enterprise collaboration. Collaboration is secured and engagement is inherently focused through choice of participation, whilst the collaboration possibilities retain the benefits of the broader publication models as desired.

User Experience

Oracle Social Network is built to extending collaboration on the web, mobile, or existing clients to allow users to interact with familiar interfaces. This enables users the ability to choose how they want to collaborate and enable quick user adoption.

In modern enterprises, we are the tenement dwellers, ignoring our neighbors unless we get an explicit request for our help (e.g. email or phone call). This barrier not only discourages others from asking for our help, it discourages us from asking for the help of others. With Oracle Social Network, users can join Conversations or Social Objects where others are visibly participating, offering help rather than waiting to be asked. Oracle Social Network enables virtual team behavior to mirror what teamwork is supposed to be about: not only performing your own role well - which you can do using other collaborative tools - but moving to that next step prevalent in great teams, assisting and covering for each other without having to be asked explicitly.
Social Objects manage their relationship both with the underlying object of the enterprise application or process and also with side or related Conversations. Oracle Social Network provides in and out-of-band notifications, alerts, and digests via multiple channels including desktop alerts, email, and mobile push notifications. Email alerts and digests allow individuals to respond directly to posts, comments or follow-ups directly from the email client.

A full range of analytics to support usage monitoring and adoption is provided by Oracle Social Network Business Views. Standard enterprise reporting on usage and data volumes are enhanced by analytics that help identify evangelists within the user community, valuable features, uptake and growth. Adoption of any new system, but particularly collaboration and social systems, require change management within the organization and the Business Views are designed to support the process.

Web Based Application

The Oracle Social Network web based application provides a wealth of features to interact, organize, find and administer Conversations, Social Objects and People. The web application provides data driven intelligence including presence, trending and recommendations on useful (the preferred enterprise model of the consumer “like”), similar and valued content utilizing both social and system-of-record driven graphs (e.g. presentations used in deals that closed over $1M). Presence provides rich activity and real-time indication, which draws users together to communicate.

The Oracle Social Network is available primarily via a web-based client compatible with modern browsers. The web client takes three forms:

1. A stand-alone Conversation stream intended for integrating Social Object feeds and Conversations into other applications;

2. A list and activity module intended for embedding into applications maintaining Social Object and Conversation process context; and

3. The Oracle Social Network web application itself with the additional initiating, finding and organizing capabilities.

A browser plug-in is used for advanced capabilities including toaster notifications, application sharing, voice and video.

Tablets & Mobile Devices

Oracle Social Network also offers mobile clients for the popular Smartphone platforms, such as the iPad and iPhone, as an alternative to a mobile browser experience. The mobile clients bring the full real-time experience of the web application to the mobile platform and have been specifically designed to support the needs of the enterprise mobile user: easy and efficient access to the latest information, access to and the ability to update system-of-record data surfaced in the Social Objects, the ability to engage with office or other mobile based colleagues and the ability to view and respond to enterprise content and annotations. The native mobile clients also provide capabilities unique to the mobile environment and use case, such as photo and video upload and location information.
Microsoft Outlook plug-in

Additionally, a Microsoft Outlook plug-in allows email recipients, attachments, and text content to be uploaded into an existing or new Conversation as needed, identifies Conversations similar to selected email, and allows the user to participate with the Oracle Social Network feature set without leaving the Outlook environment.

Architecture

Oracle Social Network is available as a Software-as-a-Service application within Oracle’s Cloud. Built as an enterprise class application, standard backup and recovery, archiving, retention, legal hold and eDiscovery are all core server administrative capabilities. It is built on Oracle’s Database and Virtualization technologies.

The Oracle Social Network Platform and API allows existing applications to be extended, features to be embedded and future clients to be developed by partners and customers who need more extensive customizations than are possible via gadgets and templates. Third party and custom applications can be integrated through the extensible Social Object framework and Conversations placed back into applications. Every construct in Oracle Social Network has an addressable URL, allowing lightweight integrations to be implemented quickly and easily.
Oracle Social Network is an Oracle Fusion Middleware 11g compliant product, providing compatibility and integration with the full set of Oracle’s Fusion Middleware solutions in areas such as installation, configuration, high-availability, and Identity Management. Oracle Social Network can be fully integrated into the enterprise infrastructure – including access control systems, content management systems, enterprise search and expertise location, and, of course, enterprise applications.

**Oracle Fusion Customer Relationship Management**

The release of Oracle Sales Cloud in the Oracle Cloud offers direct pre-built integration with Oracle Social Network facilitating contextual collaboration across the sales teams and channels. Customers and Opportunities within Sales Cloud are pre-integrated as Social Objects within Oracle Social Network, allowing individuals to follow system generated updates and record key CRM data fields from within the collaboration applications experience. For example, sales account managers can extend the sales team to include the required expertise at any point within the sales cycle and can keep on top of forecasts, win probability and potential revenue all from within Oracle Social Network. All of the knowledge that is created in the successful collaborative sale to the customer is retained as organizational knowledge and encapsulated within the core CRM application.

**Oracle Applications**

The integration with Oracle Sales Cloud provides a compelling launch story for Oracle Social Network, but the wider reality is that Sales Cloud represents just one of the many applications integrated with Oracle Social Network through which Oracle will deliver the social business.

Extended integrations with Oracle Fusion Applications places Oracle Social Network in a unique market position -- tying together high value organization processes with the available expertise that goes beyond any one horizontal application or vertical specialization. Only Oracle with their breadth of enterprise applications, industry businesses and social collaboration capabilities, can truly deliver the social business.

**Conclusion**

Oracle Social Network addresses the “Collaboration Gap” of the traditional tool-centered approach that requires the user to break context to communicate and prevents the expansion of organizational knowledge. Oracle Social Network is uniquely able to bring together all people within the Enterprise and Cross-Enterprises.

Enterprise application integration and a unique Oracle Social Network Conversation model drive adoption and participation for increased user productivity. Available within the Oracle Cloud or integrated across a broad set of enterprise applications, Oracle Social Network is the collaboration platform on which to deliver the social enterprise.