

Social Networks: IT Giants Are Ready to Rock

By David Needle

October 30, 2009

SANTA CLARA -- As the Facebook generation becomes a bigger part of the enterprise, companies face the challenge of implementing increasingly familiar social network technologies in concert with legacy systems. That was one of the themes expressed by a panel of leading vendors here at the Collaborate 2.0 conference sponsored by SD Forum.

"In IT, a user is a login; on Facebook, a user is a profile with a picture and other details. That's pretty empowering. End users are driving change," said Chuck Ganapathi, senior vice president of products at Salesforce.com (NYSE: CRM).



(L to R) Chuck Ganapathi, senior vice president of products at Salesforce.com and Matt Thompson, general manager of Microsoft's Silicon Valley developer and platform evangelism
Photo: David Needle

The next generation of IT applications may well leverage something like Facebook's look and feel for a logical reason. "Facebook has over 300 million users now and is on the way to training half a billion people on what is really a pretty sophisticated application -- there's a lot going on there," Ganapathi said.

And as these collaborative, social network technologies inevitably spread, Ganapathi said a key issue to be resolved is IT control versus user power.

"Your employees are going to download Yammer because it's a better way to communicate," he said. "Getting to a happy medium is going to be very important in the enterprise."

But it's also not just about allowing blogs or adding a corporate wiki, he said.

"There are lots of tools today to make the conversations in your company more social, but what about the data that's sitting there in Excel, in ERP, in e-mail? How you make that data social is going to be key."

Microsoft has lit a FUSE

Matt Thompson, general manager of Microsoft's (NASDAQ: MSFT) developer and platform evangelism in Silicon Valley, said the software giant is ready to make moves in the social network/collaboration space beyond its already successful SharePoint software. He said Microsoft Research has about 25 different social collaboration projects they've put under one group called FUSE Labs.

"You're going to see some innovative stuff under social collaboration," he said. "We have a vision for where this is going in the future. Video and telepresence is a key piece. And you'll see a lot more interoperability as well. This can't be a single stack."

Thompson noted that Facebook execs have said they have no plans to develop a private version or social graph for the enterprise, though they haven't ruled out working with partners -- one of which is Microsoft, which owns a stake in the social networking phenom.

"Internal IT is a very fertile ground to disrupt," Thompson said. "The key is there won't be multiple social graphs. I don't think Facebook realizes the big role they have."

That said, Thompson gave Facebook big props for opening up its platform to let users take their Facebook identity with them when visiting other sites.

"Facebook Connect was a very smart thing," he said. "Facebook Connect is growing faster than Facebook.com."

Thompson also took note of Twitter, which he said he loves. Like Facebook Connect, he said a huge percentage of users use the service without Twitter.com as a starting point.

"They're delivering collaboration at 140 characters wherever the user may be," he said.

Cisco and the future of work

Like Microsoft, Cisco (NASDAQ: CSCO) is investing in multiple social network and collaborative areas, including a portfolio of nine businesses in the incubation stage.



(L to R) Didier Moretti, vice president of business incubation in Cisco's Emerging Technologies group and Roosevelt Bynum, manager for IBM developerWorks Web applications
Photo: David Needle

"Our thesis is that we're on the cusp of a big transformation like the Internet in the '90s around the future of work, putting people and productivity back into the equation," said Didier Moretti, vice president of business incubation in Cisco's Emerging Technologies group.

IBM (NYSE: IBM) is another company very much on the social network bandwagon. Roosevelt Bynum, who manages the company's developerWorks Web applications, said the My developerWorks community site is a "like Facebook for geeks."

(Update: An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to Cisco as the development partner that helped Starbucks create the MyStarbucksIdea site. The partner was actually Salesforce.com which powers the site.)