

PRODUCT FLASH

IBM Wants You to Get Social at Work with Lotus Connections

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IN THIS PRODUCT FLASH

This IDC Flash discusses Lotus Connections, an integrated suite of social software tools that IBM announced at its Lotusphere 2007 conference on January 22, 2007.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

"MySpace for the workplace" could describe the social networking tools that organizations will be seeking in an effort to bring Web 2.0 technologies to work. IBM's Lotus Connections is intended to help organizations do that and more. It is a server software product featuring an integrated suite of tools that IBM describes as "the first ready-for-business social software." Over the past few years, consumer and business networking sites have appeared, and workers have started bringing consumer information sharing and productivity tools into the workplace, including blogs, wikis, and mashups, the same way consumer instant messaging and presence were adopted by organizations to enhance business collaboration and communications. Recognizing this, IBM has created a comprehensive suite of social tools that takes advantage of existing corporate directories and network and application access authentication systems to enable workers to be more social at work — that is, to get to know each other and share information in the interest of advancing organizational objectives while safeguarding the flow of business information.

Lotus Connections offers IT departments an enterprise-ready suite with the security, management, and application integration capabilities needed to fit into a business environment. IT departments have largely been trying to ignore rising use of nonsecure, ad hoc downloadable, or hosted Web 2.0 tools for connecting and collaboration inside and outside the organization. Although having proactive end users who procure their own tools may save some time and resources for the front-line IT staff, this "do IT yourself" approach can cause migraines for IT staff, corporate compliance, and risk officers who need to ensure that business-related information and communications are compliant with business and regulatory requirements, protected from unauthorized access, backed up in the event of a system failure or user error, and retrievable for an appropriate period of time.

Lotus Connections features the following:

- ☒ **Profiles:** This contains corporate white pages of information about each individual and his or her role in the organization, areas of interest and expertise, and location to enable other people to discover, contact, and build valuable relationships within their organization. The technology originated from an internal IBM BluePages tool that it ran on its intranet for several years.
- ☒ **Dogear:** This is a tagging functionality that encourages better information sharing and collaboration and quicker information retrieval by creating bookmarks to Web pages and other content that is assigned a URL. IBM has been using this tool internally for the past two years.
- ☒ **Blogs:** This is corporate blogging that enables people to publish content and capture feedback for ad hoc conversations within or across departments, or eventually extend the discussion to people outside of the organization.
- ☒ **Community:** These are community Web pages that can be developed to organize discussions and collaboration around topics and projects with integrated blogging, tagging, and search capabilities.
- ☒ **Activities:** This is an organization of files, email, chat transcripts, and lightweight project management capabilities used to create and track milestones for daily ad hoc collaboration.

Lotus Connections will be available as a standalone product that can be deployed by organizations with or without any other IBM infrastructure. Lotus Connections is designed primarily for internal use but could be extended outside the firewall through an extranet implementation. For Lotus Sametime customers, Lotus Connections provides integration with Sametime instant messaging, presence, Web and voice conferencing, and application plugins/mashups. Lotus Connections will also integrate with the latest version of QuickPlace (renamed Quickr), which features structured collaborative workspaces and library services for connecting to content management systems and repositories like IBM FileNet and WebSphere Portal.

Lotus Connections grew out of an IBM research project that was tested and used by IBM's over 300,000 employees during the past several years. At Lotusphere, members of IBM's research group provided glimpses into current projects that could make their way into future product releases, such as a personal productivity

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assistant that takes the integration between Sametime and Lotus Connections a step further by suggesting information that could be helpful for the particular project or activity selected in Lotus Connections.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Although the term *social networking* sounds incongruous within a corporate workplace, the technology and practice of sharing personal information that grew out of consumer sites provides a faster and easier way to share information with other people. Social networking tools are designed to provide easier ways to make workers feel more connected to other workers in their organizations and to tap into a workforce's expertise and knowledge for more efficient collective problem solving and project completion.

Will IBM succeed at making a connection with corporate buyers with Lotus Connections?

From a product perspective, Lotus Connections offers a rich set of capabilities, a fresh and cool user interface, and packaging that is relatively easy to deploy by organizations looking for a safe way to bring Web 2.0 to its workers. The only functionality that is missing and should be added in the next release is a wiki for content collaboration within the confines of Lotus Connection, rather than having to mind shift to Quickr or Notes, which may not even be available.

From a cost standpoint, it is too early to tell what social software will cost because IBM hasn't announced pricing for Lotus Connections, which will be competing with point tools that will be available for free as open source software, hosted services, or bundled features of portal or content management systems. Pricing will have to be very reasonable for organizations to deploy social software to everyone in the organization, rather than on a limited basis for groups or departments the way team collaborative applications have unfortunately often been deployed.

The big question is, how widely will social software be adopted and actively used by workers? This is a question that IT organizations and executive management will want to answer before deciding to deploy the solution. Consumer social networking sites have grown rapidly as individuals watch other individuals participate in a Web phenomenon that empowers individuals to easily publish information about themselves and their interests, often motivated by egos and the desire to feel connected to other individuals and online communities in a virtual way. In the workplace, the motivation to use social software is similar but not identical. The tools will need to be cool and easy to use to attract initial attention, but that is just the beginning. As a classic example of the network effect, the benefit of using social software grows along with the number of users and content contributions. Achieving a critical mass of active contributors, beyond just having their profiles listed, will be necessary for long-term success.

How will this be accomplished? Some people will jump right in, either because of personal inclination or a desire to be viewed as a subject matter expert; others may see the time-saving advantages of posting information to a blog or profile page to reduce common inquiries. Younger workers who are active on consumer social networking sites are more likely to be open about posting details about themselves, their activities, and their interests. However, others will be accustomed to keeping information private out of fear that sharing too much information risks giving up one's own intellectual property and value as a worker. This will be especially true for workers at organizations without a collaborative work culture who have grown used to exchanging information via email with a select group of other workers and who feel the need to protect their hard-earned knowledge and information. It is these individuals who will require education about the benefits to them and the organization and clear expectations about what the organizations expect of them in the form of contribution and participation. Contributing to social networks should be positioned to users as an important way of reducing the time that it takes to find and retrieve the right person and information to help with a business task or activity. Finally, as with consumer social networking sites where concerns about adults preying on children are rising, workers will need to be reassured that the risks posed by workplace "predators" — that is, unauthorized users accessing information and authorized users misusing information — will be minimized.

For IBM, the competition lurks in the growing availability of blogs, wikis, personal activity sites, and expertise search within Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 and other portal and content management solutions, as well as standalone solutions mostly from start-ups. All are eager to be seen as embracing Web 2.0 and will ride that sales and marketing wave as long as possible. For current and prospective IBM customers, the question will be whether to try out a dedicated social networking/Web 2.0 suite or take a piecemeal approach. For many organizations, jumping in with a business-ready suite will provide the most value to users with the least risk for IT.

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