

SECURE COLLABORATION

The end of gatekeeping.

BY JOE RUCK

THERE HAVE BEEN many times in the recent past that technology breakthroughs have triggered organizational and societal transformation. Web access and email were the powerhouses of the last decade and have engrained themselves into our day-to-day life. More recently, Twitter with its counterintuitive 140-character limit is making a strong case for enduring impact. Now social media and Web 2.0 collaboration tools are showing signs of such a promise at the enterprise level. It is worthwhile then to ask what enterprise norms will now change as a result of the growing impact of social media. The most significant may be one I have personally witnessed — the end of gatekeeping.

Balancing access with privacy

All companies have information repositories, such as customer databases, product catalogs, and engineering plans. Employees across the enterprise need routine access to their content, sometimes on an ad-hoc basis, but that access cannot be completely unfettered because of confidentiality and security restrictions. Valuable IP, personnel data, and strategic plans should not be left unprotected. Access control is typically entrusted to an individual, who acts as the go-to person to gain access for any one piece of information — the gatekeepers.

Balancing the relative merits of privacy and openness is not black and white, so often companies will opt for the low-risk approach, which is simply to lock down access and give discretionary control to the gatekeeper. Not surprisingly then, gatekeepers often err on the side of caution and are perceived as bottlenecks as they refuse or slow-roll legitimate requests for access. Management is often asked to clear the request, which is of course grossly inefficient.

Example: sales contracts

One example is access to contracts by sales teams. In most organizations, contract repositories are kept within Legal. When renegotiating an agreement, account managers will typically require access to the customer contract history to understand precedent and set expectations. But often sales reps are not authorized to directly ask Legal for a contract. This is despite

the fact that the individual who has to make the request was the very same person who negotiated the original contract. Instead they need management to ask on their behalf, creating email chains which inevitably cause delays and frustration for all parties involved.

Modern Web collaboration tools rewire this process. There is nothing new about sharing content, but what is new with enterprise 2.0 tools is the combination of ease and granular access controls that can be brought to bear. To go back to the contracts example, while nobody would want to allow uncontrolled access, there is no reason not to let an account team see all contracts pertinent to their territory. Add in access auditing to head off accidental error or abuse, and the system itself can now provide access 24/7 to those that need it, and protect the information from those that don't.



Trust and verify

The very act of implementing a secure Web 2.0 collaboration system will catalyze a debate on exactly what content should be available to whom and on what terms (read-only? editable?). Typically the outcome of

such reviews is to open up content to many more people who need rapid access, a watershed moment for organizations as silos are suddenly connected. Of course, connecting people with legitimate requirements is not synonymous with throwing open the doors to all comers — quite the contrary. In fact a major benefit of secure collaboration systems is to enhance the security of important documents that otherwise might be sent in regular (i.e. highly insecure) email.

The overall effect of such streamlining on gatekeepers is clear. They go. Replaced by more reliable and secure automated policies, they must reinvent themselves productively. Of course such a prescription can be easier said than done. But maintaining artificial barriers for the rest of the company to navigate is not a compelling reason to spare their feelings. Gatekeeping will end.

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