

The Power of Organizing Without Organizations

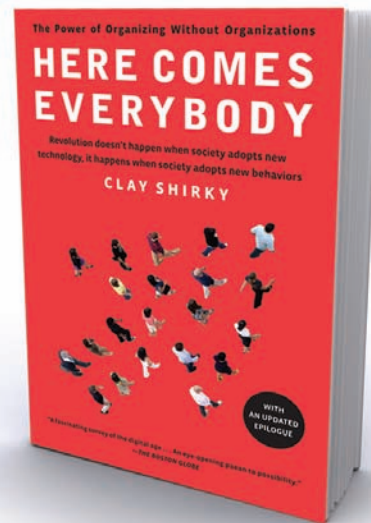
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Information management is evolving from controlled centralized systems with restricted access to decentralized systems with seemingly free access. This transition has been evident over the past decade, with traditional enterprise content management products adding modules that include more open forms of collaboration, such as wikis and blogs.

Your organization's culture and its core businesses will often determine how quickly it adopts these new ways of collaboration and communication using social media tools its employees use in their personal lives – for example, Facebook and Twitter – to enhance its competitive advantage.

Social networking in all of its forms is the newest challenge to the information management and compliance communities. The choices are to be reactive or to be proactive. If your organization is to survive in this changing economic and technical world, there is only one choice: you must understand the medium and the challenges and be prepared to provide a point of view on how social networking can or cannot be leveraged for your organization.

Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* helps frame up how Web 2.0, Enterprise 2.0, and social networking have evolved and the impact these open systems have, not only on organizations, but also on society as a whole. In fact, these tools people are pushing organizations to re-think current paradigms of how people work on a global scale.



Why Social Networking?

Why is social networking such a force, and why do people want to participate when there are no financial incentives? Shirky opines it is because individuals have found a medium through which they can be heard. He takes this theme and logically traces how what he calls individuals “finding their voice” has pushed the envelope on collaboration and added legitimacy to worldwide collaboration tools, such as Wikipedia.

He further theorizes that individuals often coalesce into groups with shared interests and vision. Stay-at-home moms form new friendships and share lessons learned on a regular basis. Those more technically inclined can participate in product development.

Photographers using Flickr can have critiques made in real time and, in some cases, find mentors to help them improve. Shirky provides numerous examples that demonstrate that what seem like random conversations often result in the creation of a community point of view that drives change in public opinion and, in some cases, has political ramifications.

Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations

Author: **Clay Shirky**

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From a records management perspective, technological change is not new, but the speed in which changes are occurring is. Beginning with the printing press and moving on to newspapers, radios, telephones, teletypes, facsimiles, copy machines, personal computers, Internet, e-mail, and personal digital assistants, we see how technology has affected our ability to communicate and collaborate with individuals both inside and outside of our organizations and homes.

Generational Differences

The sea change in communication technology is only half the story. The response and rapid adaptation to the technology by various age groups have

created generational differences in our workforce and society as a whole. For Baby Boomers, the personal computer and Internet was a strange new world.

Here Comes Everybody is an informative and interesting book that helps explain the sea change we are experiencing in communications and collaboration.

Telephone tag and sharing information by snail mail were the norms. Now, consider younger generations who can't imagine a world without the Internet, cellular phones, and texting. They are used to multi-tasking faster and shorter communications; unfettered and unfiltered communications are the norms of their behavior.

Shirky points out that to ignore the generational drivers behind social networking and the impact on the workforce will be problematic for organizations that do not become comfortable with these new behaviors. With an aging workforce leaving organizations around the world, how will they recruit and retain new talent? They will be successful only if they use these same tools. Will this create new risks and issues? Certainly, but by understanding how society has arrived at its current state, information professionals can better anticipate uses and misuses and help mitigate the associated risks.

Benefits for Society and Business

Although Shirky does not delve deeply into some of the bad consequences of social networking, such as short attention spans and potential loss of personal contact, he points out that if the tools are used appropriately, they could help save time (and money) and allow for more personal interactions with friends and families. Shirky is very cautious about making any predictions on this point, however.

In reality, social networking has been around for years, under a variety of monikers including listservs, e-mail,

electronic bulletin boards, and their progeny. However, the newest generation of Web 2.0 technologies, be it MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, LinkedIn, or Twitter, is being used in even more creative ways. Shirky provides numerous examples of how social networking has resulted in connecting geographically dispersed people to create communities of interest.

A recent example is how President Barack Obama leveraged social networking tools to rally his supporters during his presidential campaign. As a result, Shirky explains, "collective action involves challenges to governance" and, in some cases, results in political change.

Controls on Content

Shirky also explains why some social networking sites have failed. Some had too many controls or requirements around usage and faded away. But, as information management professionals, we are control orientated, and one concern we naturally have is how to ensure the authenticity of the information presented on wikis, blogs, or other social networking sites. If everyone is creating and managing content, won't this result in a "Tragedy of the Commons," where multiple people acting in their own self interest will eventually destroy the resource? Shirky asserts this situation is avoided by the collective self-policing by the wiki or blog community.


Those who try to subvert the conversations by maliciously removing or changing content will be thwarted. How does this happen? According to Shirky, individuals take on the roles they are comfortable with. More outspoken individuals will actively contribute, and those more comfortable perfecting the prose will be the editors. When the owners of the space notice their hard work is being threatened, they step up to correct any misstate-

ments or other acts of sabotage.

This behavior depends on a vigilant audience and community who take personal responsibility to ensure accuracy. On the business side, monitoring the reliability of this content can be achieved through incentives, proper training, and empowering employees to take accountability for the content.

Business Rules

Shirky concentrates on those tools and resulting behaviors outside the firewalls of organizations, so he does not provide any hard and fast rules for how to manage this extraordinary collaboration explosion within the business environment. Nor does he provide any specific guidance on how to capture information from a records management perspective or any specific litigation or employment law implications. However, he does write about how these new technologies can challenge new ways of working.

For example, the use of e-mail has revolutionized the way we work and communicate. Many times employees are copied on messages about which they have little interest or knowledge. Moving these interactions to one space, such as a wiki, facilitates engaging employees outside of regular distribution lists and promotes those with subject matter expertise to contribute to projects that may not have otherwise reached them, allowing them to have a positive impact on the organization's learning. *Here Comes Everybody* is an informative and interesting book that helps explain the sea change we are experiencing in communications and collaboration. Although not explicitly stated, Shirky has presented a challenge to all information management professionals. "Don't get blindsided by new technologies." 

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