



Law Firms of the Future: Driving Intranet Evolution with Google+

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF BUSINESS INTEGRATION WITHIN LAW FIRMS, and where is it now? What approach does today's law firm need to take to stay innovative, ahead of the curve and optimize its operations to better serve and stay one step ahead of its clients?



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As a starting point, integration accelerated through collaborative cloud computing and the resulting minimal technology footprint helps lead teams and organizations through innovative structural and behavioral change. This approach leverages social networks such as Google+ and a cloud business platform a la Google Apps and redefines internal and client collaboration as we know it. A now both decentralized and centralized intranet, your interactions choose the delivery model, provides the innovation path forward. Add video conferencing, document sharing and collaboration, all weaved within an internal social path for the firm, with the ability to share with clients and others on the "outside." This approach is best suited for shifting traditional (well-defined and linear) organizational structures to a team-based environment, with no static steps involved in the business driven initiatives.

SOCIAL MEDIA, SOCIAL CIRCLES AND TEAMS

An analogy I often draw in the varied approaches to team building is through social media. Consider the multitude of evolving social strategies that drive competing corporate agendas of the likes of Facebook, Google, Twitter, Apple and Microsoft. How are they redefining the way we interact with each other, the information closest to us, and how we view our day-to-day realities? Then, take their approaches and consider the resulting behavioral trends in consumer behavior.

What we're moving toward is a truly unique, inside out take on communication, and therefore collaboration between two individuals, teams and the resulting corporate entity. Which is more effective, Facebook? Google+? Or traditional email? Which are more interactive, traditional corporate teleconference meetings, or a Google+ Hangout where all can see and interact with one another at once?

The label "consumer" is often misleading here, as social trends cross corporate, individual and social groups, just as the team building approach will. What we've been seeing is a blending of identities for some time. From the individual perspective, corporate culture is just one more in a series of social circles we're a part of and which we communicate through. With that in mind, which corporate cultures offer the best team building approach? Which ones suffer from inefficiency as a resulting lack of innovative team building or team coordination strategy?

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There are two fundamental approaches to consider: 1) Search and you will find, and 2) I log in, and it's given to me. Think of Google and Facebook, or Microsoft and Google+ as two completely separate approaches here. Google+ represents the social media "bring it to me" approach while Microsoft SharePoint-based search queries a database of data (go get it).

BUILDING THE SPHERICAL ORGANIZATION

Another concept worth visualizing is to look at an organization structured in a sphere-oriented manner as opposed to the traditional linear corporate structure. Social circles – internal teams – are no longer linear, and alter the traditional business relationship the law firm of the future has with its staff, their personal lives and how this reflects on the corporate brand as well as the client relationships.

How does this rebuilding process based on spheres (as opposed to traditional linear communications and interactions) occur? Many firms are investigating Six Sigma management strategies, as well as exploring legal project management (LPM). Can one take the best approaches in Six Sigma and LPM while adapting their own vision toward rebuilding their organizations into team-driven spherical structures? I say yes, and at Bradford & Barthel, LLP, we have used this approach in transitioning to Google Apps and in driving our intranet evolution with Google+. Adapting sound underlying core principles as they fit from a variety of backgrounds to the firm's own innovation path is what will ensure its long term integrity and the evolution as it relates to client service.

POSTURE, POSITIONING AND TIMING

In shaping the law firm of the future, some draw from either a martial philosophy or create a visual metaphor to assist in creating tangible, driving principles. By creating a metaphor taken from a dance between partners, in this case the firm and its client, it is important and useful to focus on three tenants; posture, positioning and timing.

Posture represents the firm structure; is it malleable, flexible and agile enough internally to act on a moment's notice? Positioning refers to the law firm's relationship with its clients, both internal and external. Are things organized in a spherical structure that touches all clients seamlessly? Have new organizational approaches been introduced to ensure the firm is positioned to evolve with its clients? Has a culture of innovation and forward thinking been integrated through all aspects of firm business?

And finally, timing is simply the ability for the firm of the future to act or not. It seems simple, but you would be amazed how many firms are built in ways where action or non-action isn't a choice, but a consequence of their aging structures.

Additionally, prejudice in movement and prejudice in thinking and lack of understanding lead to faulty movement. Now translate prejudice in movement between two dancers to actual prejudice in communication between two individuals in the workplace. Carry this concept to prejudice in understanding business strategy across corporate departments, to the firm's executive committee driving all firm decisions, and the point becomes clear. Acting or managing through prejudicial thinking in this manner is like having fault lines running through the firm when everything should be seamless and fluid. Static steps lead to static thinking. Stagnation in the corporate environment is the end of that environment, sooner or later.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE FIRM INTRANET VIA GOOGLE+

So how do we provide a medium for the firm to apply these principles without static steps or static thinking? At Bradford & Barthel, LLP we believe firms of the future will use evolving hosted platforms as behavioral change drivers, as they continue down their integration path with these concepts.

Google+ is an example of what changes the concept of the intranet into this nimble organizational approach. Think of the user experience when logging into a system like this. Team members and leaders across the organization log into a social media environment at the start of the day. The ability for the law firm to immediately organize into project teams is an immediate part of the user experience. Through shared circles, all communications, documentation, shared video conferences, workflows etc. are streamed directly to the individual user. This is an application of the "bring it to me" approach. Rather than email, we have postings directed to circles. Rather than traditional document management, we have a unique document collaboration approach with targeted recipients. Video conferencing and presentation conferencing is possible, recordable and now another searchable part of the day. This is where we integrate the traditional "go get it" approach – through the search box and circle creation.

Search is integrated across the hosted spectrum, and with this unique user interface we can combine our traditional search results through a social media interface. The organization creates communication through a series of shared circles through Google, enabling project and team leaders to better coordinate and share their information across the organization. This internal use of social media as an evolving intranet can then be shifted outwards through the same shared circle concept; client relations built in this manner allows the use of social media driven

initiatives to ultimately bridge the innovations of today with what evolves through the hosted platform tomorrow.

INTEGRATING ALTERNATIVE STAFFING MODELS, DRIVING DOWN COSTS AND CLOSING

Ultimately, we drive down costs in this approach through alternative staffing models, where traditional roles in the organization are re-thought along with the shift in the social media intranet or the individual bring-it-to-me concept. In some instances, the organization is able to restructure from a staffing standpoint to obtain immediate savings. In other instances, the organization is able to invest in project leaders, and business process development that in itself will drive down costs and streamline operations. Client relations development weaved throughout the organization in this way brings in a new cost development model, and encourages ingenuity and continual innovation in client relations and service.

What is taken for granted in this entire concept within the law firm of the future is that the organization has already implemented the hosted model, where cost savings through infrastructure, licensing and vendor integration are already realized. Furthermore, high-level decision makers who get this firm of the future concept look at these hosted platforms not as "the cloud" but as the information management platforms and hosted drivers for behavioral change within the enterprise. The consumerization and the spread of social media in consumer culture and individual preference is molded throughout organizations with enterprise level deployments built off the exact same concepts, while capitalizing on these same individual drivers to create business value. Where these hosted systems compete in consumer culture is the key to understanding the future of communication with our clients, and the most strategic search, touch and connectivity across our organizational culture. Whether you choose Google, Apple, Microsoft or Facebook, the way we drive our initiatives throughout our business cultures should evolve in tandem with the culture of our times. ■

About the author

Over the past two years, **Eric Hunter** has integrated a Google-driven social media knowledge and collaboration environment within Bradford & Barthel, LLP. Hunter speaks and writes on competitive strategy and collaborative cloud solutions globally and is the recipient of ILTA's 2010 Knowledge Management Champion Distinguished Peer and ILTA's 2010 Innovative Member awards. He can be reached at ehunter@bradfordbarthel.com or follow him on Twitter: [@thelihunter](https://twitter.com/thelihunter).