



Communications Firm Boosts Service with Social Networking, Collaboration

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Media and entertainment—Communications

Customer Profile

Fleishman-Hillard International Communications, part of the Omnicom Group, provides integrated communications solutions to many of the world's leading companies. Headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri, the company has 80 offices worldwide.

Business Situation

Fleishman-Hillard wanted to replace its existing portal with a solution that would make it easier for employees to find information and resources within the company, and to integrate social networking technology.

Solution

Fleishman-Hillard used Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010 to create a new enterprise portal, with integrated social networking capabilities, metadata tagging, and enterprise search.

Benefits

- Helps build communities
- Enhances business insights
- Bolsters bottom line

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Fleishman-Hillard is one of the world's leading strategic communications firms. When the company wanted to optimize its internal communications in support of its work for thousands of customers worldwide, it chose Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010 as the foundation for its enterprise collaboration portal. The solution allows the company to integrate social networking tools and makes it easier for employees to find documents, information, and people throughout the firm's 80 offices. Fleishman-Hillard will use the solution to enhance service by more quickly assembling expert teams and resources to address customers' needs. It also expects to make the company more competitive, in part by making business processes more efficient.

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Situation

Fleishman-Hillard, a global leader in strategic communications, has built its reputation on creating integrated solutions that deliver what its customers value most: meaningful, positive, and measurable impact on the performance of their organizations. The communications powerhouse’s most valuable resource is the experience and expertise of its people who, as Fleishman-Hillard states, “make us more than the sum of our parts.” Based in St. Louis, Missouri, Fleishman-Hillard has more than 2,000 employees and operates from 80 offices worldwide.

To provide the best possible counsel, Fleishman-Hillard must foster strong communication among account teams and practice groups that are often geographically dispersed. The company relied on an enterprise collaboration portal, but, says Jonella Donius, Senior Vice President, Senior Partner, and Chief Information Officer at Fleishman-Hillard, “The portal was too restrictive and didn’t provide the collaboration tools our employees needed.” She explains that the portal wasn’t as effective as it needed to be in sparking community-oriented discussions and forming strong connections among account teams, practice groups, and individuals. “The system simply wasn’t intuitive enough, so the adoption rate for the collaborative functionality was very low, and the portal primarily became a document repository.”

Employees opted for other community-building tools. For instance, in recent years, account teams at Fleishman-Hillard have adopted social networking as a primary means of internal communication. Employees take part in online discussion groups, blogs, and

other networking venues provided by companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Yammer. Donius explains, “Our company has enthusiastically embraced social networking. In today’s communications environment, these tools are critical to our ability to help clients connect with their key audiences. Internally, the informal nature of these tools, and the networking capabilities they provide, help employees find and share information very quickly. A significant drawback, however, is that use of third-party tools could introduce risks we’re just not willing to accept. We needed to keep our internal conversations inside our firewall.”

Fleishman-Hillard’s previous portal also didn’t provide a very flexible means of storing and organizing information. “The portal was very timeline-oriented. It assumed that each project had a start date and an end date. That is not how our agency works,” says David Lowey, Senior Vice President, Senior Partner, and Director of Knowledge Management at Fleishman-Hillard. “We have many client engagements that continue indefinitely. For instance, we provide corporate social responsibility guidance and expertise to clients on an ongoing basis.” The firm had no easy way to gain access to unstructured information in the portal.

The firm also found that the portal’s search capabilities were limited. “We could not dynamically search information by area of interest,” explains Lowey. “For instance, if we wanted to help a client with a financial communications crisis in the energy sector, and we wanted to find all the information we ever produced on that topic, including case studies, articles, even e-mail conversations that might lead to the people in our company with the expertise we needed, we had no easy

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way to do that.” Lowey explains that instead, the company resorted to “blast e-mails” to try to find the information and expertise that people needed.

The portal also was not connected to the vast store of data contained in the PeopleSoft-based system the company uses to manage human resources and financial information. While access to much of the information in this system must be restricted, it also contains a wealth of information that can be shared about each employee’s skills and experience.

Fleishman-Hillard concluded that it needed to replace its existing portal solution with technology that could not only help staff interact and collaborate more effectively, but also enable them to respond more rapidly to urgent requests for information by quickly and easily locating the most relevant data and best subject matter expertise within the company.

Solution

In late 2009, with the help of technology partner Aspect Software, Fleishman-Hillard decided to replace its existing portal with a solution based on Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010. Aspect is a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner specializing in unified communications and collaboration technologies. Randy Machacek, Managing Consultant at Aspect, says, “We saw the investment that Microsoft was making in SharePoint Server 2010, and we felt that the enhancements in social networking, metadata services, and connection to back-end data systems could really benefit Fleishman-Hillard.”

Working Together in New Ways

Fleishman-Hillard is an industry leader in integrating social networking tools and channels into its client solutions. So, it’s no surprise that integrating social networking capabilities in its new portal is a top priority. The company is taking advantage of NewsGator Social Sites for SharePoint 2010 to provide “microblogging” capabilities, which employees can use to start impromptu conversations, and easily add comments and summaries to content and documents throughout the portal. NewsGator is a third-party solution provider whose technology interoperates with SharePoint Server 2010.

“The solution, built on NewsGator and SharePoint Server 2010, gives people new ways to work together, using all the social networking tools they are accustomed to,” says Donius. Employees will be able to start a discussion thread from any area of the portal. For instance, when someone conducts a search of all the general managers in a specific region, that employee can quickly launch a conversation with those managers—directly from the search results page.

Mining Existing Resources

Fleishman-Hillard uses Business Connectivity Services in SharePoint Server 2010 to connect to enterprise information stored in the company’s PeopleSoft system. “There’s a lot of data stored in PeopleSoft that we will bring back into SharePoint Server 2010 as part of Fleishman-Hillard’s employee profiles,” explains Machacek. PeopleSoft contains a variety of information, largely drawn from timesheet reporting, including which client accounts an employee has worked on, which practice groups the employee has participated in,

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specific employee skills and expertise, and much more.

Donius adds, “PeopleSoft is our database of record for all of our clients and employees. We are using SharePoint Server 2010 to draw on this valuable content, gather relevant material into a centralized location, and present it in a useful manner.” The company plans to implement PerformancePoint Services in SharePoint Server 2010 to provide employees with rich, interactive dashboards and key performance indicators to quickly gain an understanding of selected categories of data stored in PeopleSoft. For instance, if a manager in the firm’s Sustainability practice group is assembling a team for a new customer account, the manager can create a customizable dashboard that identifies a range of employees from across the firm’s network and displays their Sustainability skills and experience. This information helps the manager more quickly bring together an experienced team.

The firm also uses the enhanced content tagging capabilities in SharePoint Server 2010 to help employees more easily and intuitively find information and resources among the company’s vast data stores. SharePoint Server 2010 supports a centralized tag taxonomy system, which enables Fleishman-Hillard to assign keywords to each document, file, or other resource it generates, according to an overarching corporate taxonomy. With the system, employees can add tags to the content they create. For instance, if an employee completes a case study, he or she can add tags that indicate the practice group that produced the piece, the topic, the customers it includes, and more. “Then, a user can dig for information and sort it

dynamically—by topic, practice group, client, office, or account team,” explains Lowey. Fleishman-Hillard uses enterprise search in SharePoint Server 2010 to make tagged content available to all employees across the company. In the previous system, smaller subsets of users controlled access to departmentally produced content, which often limited employee access to valuable information.

Fleishman-Hillard is able to present information from different perspectives. Machacek says, “For instance, a dynamically created client profile page can show who has worked with that client, and from which office and practice group was involved, as well as the client’s industry category and its history with Fleishman-Hillard.” Conversely, with the people search capabilities of SharePoint Server 2010, users are able to search for an employee and to see a summary page that includes information about the customers an employee has served, the employee’s history with Fleishman-Hillard, and more. Donius adds, “Many times we are called on by a client to help them respond quickly to a crisis that threatens their reputation. Especially in these situations, quickly locating the right expertise and resources is critical to providing the right solutions at the right time.”

The firm is using Microsoft SharePoint Designer 2010 and the Microsoft Visual Studio 2010 development system tools to customize the new portal, as well as the Microsoft Silverlight browser plug-in to enhance areas of the user interface. “We use Silverlight to show where members of each practice group are located on a world map,” explains Machacek. “This lets users easily see the distribution of skills and capabilities among offices.”

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Adding Unified Communications

Fleishman-Hillard plans to deploy a pilot version embodying core functionality of the new portal, to a small number of customer service teams who will serve as beta testers, at the end of April 2010. The firm plans to deploy the feature-complete portal to its more than 2,000 employees by mid-2010. The company also intends to integrate unified communications capabilities through Microsoft Office Communications Server to further streamline communication. With Office Communications Server, employees will be able to see another user's presence within the SharePoint Server environment and can immediately start an instant messaging session, escalate to a phone call, or invite others to Microsoft Office Live Meeting without having to open a different program.

Benefits

Using SharePoint Server 2010, Fleishman-Hillard is developing an enterprise collaboration portal that will give its employees streamlined access to information. Employees will be able to find people and information more easily and assemble resources for clients faster. The new portal capabilities will have a downstream effect of making the company more competitive by improving business process efficiency.

Builds More Effective Communities


Fleishman-Hillard is capitalizing on the social networking capabilities of SharePoint Server 2010 and NewsGator microblogging technology to propel a new level of impromptu discussions among employees. The technology will largely replace the company's use of Facebook, Twitter, and Yammer for these internal discussions. “With SharePoint Server 2010 and NewsGator, we will keep those valuable internal discussions

going,” says Donius. “The last thing we wanted to do was to adopt technology that would inhibit the networking and relationship building that social media channels facilitate. SharePoint Server 2010 will support our relationship and community building efforts. For instance, we will have the NewsGator microblogging feature inserted anywhere in the portal that people will be talking to each other.”

Fleishman-Hillard also will use the social networking capabilities of SharePoint Server 2010 to derive more value from in-person meetings and other face-to-face communication. “If I have created my own personal network with five or so people, around a particular topic, we will be able to stay closer over the long run because the tools will support us,” says Lowey. “With SharePoint Server 2010, we can make face-to-face connections last longer. All of this improves the collaborative culture that has always given Fleishman-Hillard a competitive advantage.”

Increases Business Insights

The new Fleishman-Hillard enterprise portal also will help the company take better advantage of years of existing work. “We already have a wealth of data at our disposal,” says Donius. “SharePoint Server 2010 gives us better tools for bringing it to the surface.” By using Business Connectivity Services to connect to information in its PeopleSoft system, and with content tagging and enterprise search capabilities, the company will be able to draw on a body of knowledge about its collective work experience across the company, from a centralized location. “We have not optimized the stores of data generated by our 80 different offices. This solution will help us use that information to our advantage.



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Improves Competitiveness

Fleishman-Hillard will use the new portal solution to help employees make business connections more quickly and easily. For instance, social networking and robust search capabilities will replace the “blast e-mail message” approach to finding resources. Lowey says, “For example, we believe people will respond very quickly when they receive targeted messages through this social networking functionality, whether they are connected to the portal through their desktop or mobile device.”

Fleishman-Hillard also notes that it will use the solution to make its business processes more efficient. “By using it to find the right people faster, and gather the right information more easily, the SharePoint Server 2010 solution helps people reduce the time they spend searching for resources, and that offers any number of benefits, from improving work/life balance, to making more time for professional development opportunities to simply making people more productive. We have set a goal for ourselves to reduce the administrative burden on our client service staff, and SharePoint Server 2010 will help us achieve that goal,” says Donius.

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Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010

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