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Why It's Time to Embrace Chatter and Put Skepticism Aside

– David Taber, CIO

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This article is the first in a series of book excerpts from the second edition of David Taber's Salesforce.com Secrets of Success, which is scheduled to be released later this year.

For Chatter doubters, there's been plenty to whine about over the last three years. But Salesforce.com has been doing some serious engineering with each of the 12 releases since then. If you thought that Chatter was just a gambit to make Wall Street analysts happy, it's time to reevaluate the service.

Here are my perspectives on [Chatter](#)—with the full disclosure that I have in no way been a booster of the technology. In fact, I'm not even all that hot on social media in general. In specific situations, social media can be valuable, but it's hardly a panacea. There, I said it.

But the whole promise of Chatter is that it's *not* a general-purpose social media platform. Its use case is focused on collaboration within a defined, self-selected community, while its user personas are in departments all over the enterprise. OK, fine. But why get serious about Chatter?

Organizations Are Becoming More Distributed, Virtual

Everyone gets that Chatter is about collaborative problem solving, something that even the smallest organization has trouble with. But as organizations get larger, more geographically diverse and more virtual, problems with simple visibility and coordination can become acute. The old days of solving a problem by running into Joe in the coffee room are over, since the virtual office is any Starbucks or airport lounge.

Analysis: [Social CRM Offers Big Rewards If You're Persistent](#), Especially For [Revenue Production](#) and [Support and Services](#)

Sales and service functions in particular have grown increasingly virtual, with many reps having no office at all. For sales, service and marketing organizations, the natural center of gravity is already the CRM system. Having a collaboration medium baked into the CRM is a natural way to improve effectiveness. CRM is the virtual coffee room.

Chatter is All About Reducing Email

I'm now in my 30th year of using email in business, and I'm increasingly irritated by the inexorable increase in volume, even with spam filtering. As was reported in a [2005 study about office PC usage](#), email and similar interrupting technologies lower IQ by more than 10 points—nearly a full standard deviation.

The problem with email isn't just its interruptive nature, which can be solved with time-management

techniques. It's the ad hoc way people organize information and communicate about it.

How you organize things for yourself will confuse me. Threaded emails help, but those email threads aren't linked to any other structured information. No matter how well you organize your inbox, it's at best a bunch of sticky notes, not a library. Worse, nobody else can reap the value you've created in your private inbox.

Case Study: [MLB.com Hits Home Run With Collaboration, Strikes Out Email Overload](#)

The model behind Chatter is to thread the conversations within structured data. That way, when you're looking at either the database record or the conversation, you have a more complete picture. Done right, it turns your system into a library that everyone can see. This saves a bunch of time for everyone who even looks at the record.

One metric for successful Chatter deployments is how much internal email can be eliminated. Ten percent is definitely achievable. Really disciplined deployments could get to 20 percent. Ask yourself: How much would you like to increase your organization's collective IQ?

The Train Is Leaving the Station

If you turn Chatter off today, you lose access to some nifty features, particularly in document storage and search. Sometime soon, parts of Salesforce.com—notably Notes, Tasks and Attachments—are going to be replaced or significantly altered by extensions to Chatter. Further, many areas of the UI will be reorganized around Chatter, so Luddites will not be able to access the latest functionality.

News: [Salesforce.com Adding 'Social Intelligence' Features to Chatter](#)

More News: [Salesforce Integrates Mobile Chatter Apps With CRM Software](#)

In my opinion, it's only a matter of time before the "Off" switch for Chatter will be removed entirely from the system. With that assumption, the issue at hand is how to get ready for that day.

This is less a technology issue and more an organizational sociology around communication, security and access control and netiquette. Just like the transition to email 20 years ago, the fundamental issues with Chatter are change management and improving the signal-to-noise ratio. It's time to get ahead of that train.

David Taber is the author of the new Prentice Hall book, "[Salesforce.com Secrets of Success](#)" and is the CEO of [SalesLogistix](#), a certified Salesforce.com consultancy focused on business process improvement through use of CRM systems. SalesLogistix clients are in North America, Europe, Israel and India. Taber has more than 25 years of experience in high tech, including 10 years at the VP level or above.

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