

The High-Performance Workplace (HPW) as an architectural concept

interview with Tom Austin by Daan Rijsenbrij, December 9th 2009.

about Tom Austin

Tom is Gartner's chief of research for social software, collaboration, communications, information management, business intelligence and high-performance workplace (HPW) research. Collaboration, social process support and Enterprise 2.0 are some of his specialties.

Daan: "In 2005 you introduced the HPW (High-Performance Workplace) as an architectural concept. Can you say something about the adoption in the market place?"

Tom: "HPW is a way of thinking about where and how to add value. It needs to be a search for an excellence to be obtained by best equipping your employees, particularly the highest impact ones, with tools and strategies to increase their impact further. HPW is not about squeezing out cost through automation (a noble goal that will persist). We have likely been too politically correct wrapping cost control and performance improvement in the same term.

Excellence is a difficult master because it is illusive and transitory. If, for example, you run the creative department for an advertising agency, your excellence can be trumped by competitors who drive you to a mediocre position in the market.

Workplace excellence and product quality are both difficult to achieve. One might set a goal of 'zero product defects' with a specific metric of no more than one flaw per 10,000 units. But that kind of goal is manufacturing oriented and ignores quality limitations in design, aesthetics, image, branding, corporate reputation, market sentiment and other areas where it is much harder to measure defects (but they still impact the business).

Workplace excellence is focused on maximizing the impact of people whose work IT can augment. But how do you measure impact? In contracts won? In speed of task force completion? In level of contention for top prizes and positions within the enterprise?

In our thinking, a high performance workplace balances a focus on maximizing the impact of people doing non-routine tasks (those which cannot be automated, e.g., selling, analyzing, discovering, innovating) while, at the same time, minimizing operating cost (through more traditional means). We are finding this politically correct balance position to be difficult to sustain because enterprises emphasize minimizing cost and maximizing efficiency of defined processes already. So we are thinking about restating the HPW premise to be one focused on 'Workplace Excellence', with an outsized emphasis on raising impact – there's more than enough emphasis on lowering cost today.

A minority of organizations do invest to achieve workplace excellence. The majority seek out 'almost good enough' on the assumption that anything better is not justifiable. Then they let it languish, so 'almost good enough' eventually devolves (by standing still) until it becomes 'really painful and counterproductive' and, finally, someone does something about it, elevating what users get to 'almost good enough' again.

Let's look at an example. We have known for 15 years or more that people are not efficient filers of emails, documents, presentations, spreadsheets and other electronic objects. We know that modern search beats personal filing systems hands down. And we've been writing research advising clients to do something about this because it has a direct bearing on user productivity and user impact on the business. So what do you think has happened? Most enterprises ignore this issue. I am constantly amazed at how people's eyes go blank when I raise this issue. The flaw here is in IT, not among the vendors, by the way. It's a demand side issue, not a supply side issue and the big vendors sense that accurately."

Daan: "Why has HPW not yet become more popular? Too difficult? Too expensive? Too fancy?"

Tom: "Enterprises do not have workplace excellence centers. They do not systematically measure user impact. Along the lines of the previous answer, they continue to support only email clients with inadequate search capabilities. It's really too bad.

Most organizations developed UT departments (UT, user technology started sometime in the 1990's). They were deeply concerned about user technology. Their concern? Reigning in the cost of support. Most UT groups I know of have non-strategic roles. This is a mistake that's natural for an IT organization. IT is focused on keeping systems up and running and managing and delivering on large scale projects. Improving user impact is way off the radar of most IT departments."

Daan: "What are the dominant business en technology drivers for the HPW nowadays? What is the role of the web 2.0 technologies on the HPW?"

Tom: "The globalization of competition, the growth of enterprises through acquisitions (as well as organically), global outsourcing of many business process components, automation of the routine, dynamic business changes occurring without warning, the seeming ubiquity of high-bandwidth connectivity and the coming emergence of mobiles as the new design center for applications in the next decade are all growth drivers for investments in workplace performance related technologies.

People used to know the others they worked with. They tended to all work in the same location. They were assigned specific responsibilities on long term projects. They often went bowling after work and played softball together in the summer. All of that has changed. Now people are on several different simultaneous projects, working with those they don't know and who do not necessarily share goals, metrics or employers, on tasks that are imprecisely defined and urgent. Project teams span time zones, languages and cultures.

People are beginning to realize that maybe Minsky was right. Minsky was an economist to argued that the notion of periods of stability interrupted by intermittent disturbances and downturns was completely wrong. He suggested that economies were collections of continuing disturbances with intermittent periods of (fleeting) stability. Business feels like that today and people (typically users) are clamoring for tools to help them work more effectively in this highly ad hoc, continuously changing world.

Users are, by the way, not waiting for IT to provide these collaboration tools. Instead, they're going out and using them as SaaS (or cloud-based services) from the Internet. Or they're setting up (yet another) hidden server in the knee-hole of their desk running an unapproved package (such as the Workplace Sharepoint Service elements of Sharepoint 2007 from Microsoft).

And we've found IT organizations engaging in 'don't ask, don't tell' type strategies about users exploiting Internet-based ('Web 2.0') collaboration and social process support tools – they're saying, by policy, that users are not authorized to do that but they're not generally blocking the users from doing it because they know it will raise pressures inside to do more to help the users. It's an interesting (and, we think, transitory) phase for IT.

Web 2.0 enthusiasm is sometimes called the 'read/write' or 'participatory' web. The large numbers of people clamoring for similar capabilities inside the enterprise (also known as 'Enterprise 2.0') continues to grow. Web 2.0 enthusiasm feels as strong today, in 2009, as PC enthusiasm did in 1994. That doesn't mean it will wash over enterprises quite as quickly as PCs did 15 years ago (there are a variety of issues, including enterprise-culture, that may slow

the growth of Enterprise 2.0 investments – see 'Danger Lurks When Enterprise 2.0 and Organizational Cultures Do Not Match' August 2009). Web 2.0 enthusiasm is primarily user-driven.

Of course, various vendors are doing their best to fan the flames. Microsoft has done the best job, executing one successful tactic after another. This time with Sharepoint, an infrastructure and platform play. The arrival of Sharepoint (WSS and Microsoft Office System Server 2007) unleashed substantial infrastructure investment – along with a growing level of custom application investment – in many IT organizations worldwide. The business driver? End user departmental pressure for better collaboration tools, linked to by Microsoft Office which is virtually ubiquitous.

Other vendors are not far behind. Indeed, in some places, IBM is ahead, at least for now; Google is an agent provocateur and we expect the total number of players in all the different technology areas that fall under HPW to continue to grow over the next 2 to 5 years."

Daan: "It looks like that Websphere (IBM) and Sharepoint (Microsoft) are nowadays the most suitable middleware (technical environment) to implement a HPW. Can you comment on that?"

Tom: "That's too narrow a viewpoint, I'm afraid. By segment, there are big-platform-infrastructure players (such as IBM and Microsoft today in email) and there are specialists (such as Jive Software in collaboration and social process support). But there are many different segments (e.g., content analytics, sentiment analysis, enterprise performance management) in HPW that you're forgetting.

This isn't just about collaboration! (and collaboration's social kin). If someone is looking at base platform infrastructure, IBM and Microsoft collectively have strong leads over the other players. But I'll repeat my suggestion that perhaps, in the area of collaboration and social process support, enterprises might be best off focusing on specific objectives and comparing specialist products versus the cost of building (and managing and maintaining) custom code written to the base platform infrastructure. Specialist versus platform is one of those devilishly difficult debates because the answer really isn't an IT answer. The answer has to be driven from assumptions about short and long term business needs."

Daan: "In 2005 you stated the strategic planning assumption with a 0.7 probability: 'through 2010, no single architectural model will adequately encompass workplace technologies'.

In a month we reach 2010. So how is it with your prediction? How many models are available? How many categories of HPW do you think of at the moment?"

Tom: "Spot on!

I am still waiting to see advanced content analytics with machine learning to spot new and emerging patterns in videos shared on peer-to-peer networks on the internet that integrate well with either Websphere or Sharepoint.

I know there are several vendors who would like to claim they have everything you need within a single architecture, but achieving real business objectives requires 'a simple matter of programming'. No one offers a single architectural model that covers all segments (but some do offer more than one architecture with little more than cosmetic integration between them)."

Daan: "Do we get separate HPW's for our working environment and our social life? Or do you see a merger between them because the borders between work, social life and leisure activities starts to evaporate in the future?"

Tom: "They merge. They are already merging."

Daan: "Do you think that at the end the HPW will be consumerized? I mean everyone is always present by means of his/her own HPW."

Tom: "Consumerization is a powerful force that, in the end, will rule. The problem is how we make the transition from IT managed to consumer-choice-based alternatives.

We are seeing 'cracks' in the wall, so to speak, with the prevalence of 'don't ask, don't tell'. At the same time, some of this is hard to deal with. Many of the vendors sell to IT and have little

interest in seeing consumerization succeed because it will cut substantially into their profits and their primary IT buyers don't want to see it happen.

The consumer-technology model has its own limits. This is a very complex discussion area with a lot of uncertainties in both directions.

In the end, consumerization will rule but how we get there is going to be a difficult battle."

Daan: "Is the HPW the last gimmick, the last attempt to please the end user? Or do you foresee quite other efforts? And in what directions must we think?"

Tom: "Your question is too cute! HPW is a strategy, not a technology. It's about maximizing employee impact. It's not a gimmick."

Daan: "Thanks a lot for sharing your insights with us. In my lectures I always state that a nice digital workplace ought to be an important reason why people like to work in your company, just like a modern building or a challenging brand.

I do have the idea that all the technology one needs for building HPW are already present for some time. We are only missing competent and creative architects to design HPW's and to sell the need for HPW's to the business.

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