

## SearchCIO.com

### GE brings social collaboration to life with Colab

How do you encourage 300,000 globally dispersed employees to embrace social collaboration? Start with giving them what they want. Oh, and while you're at it, compress time and space. To hear General Electric Co. Corporate CIO Ron Utterbeck talk about Colab, GE's [social collaboration platform](#), it not only sounds plausible but actually sounds exciting.

Ron Utterbeck,  
corporate CIO,  
General Electric Co.

Utterbeck, who is also director of GE's [Advanced Manufacturing and Software Technology Center](#) in Van Buren Township, Mich., said GE has been on a "[collaboration journey](#)" for more than 10 years. File sharing, email, chatting -- many of the elements were there, but cohesion was lacking.

"The one area we were missing was really that social media aspect," Utterbeck said. "How do you get a lot of people not only sharing documents, but then sharing those ideas and sharing those concepts?"

From this question of how to add the [value of collective wisdom](#) to collaboration, [Colab](#) was born. The platform incorporates social tools like the activity streams found in Facebook and the real-time connection of Twitter, along with customized internal search capabilities to enhance, expedite and enrich workflows. The rollout to so-called power users -- chief among them the company's core of knowledge workers -- began in mid-January. Through word of mouth and a focused how-to corporate communications campaign, that soft launch has since taken off.

#### What's next in GE's social collaboration journey?

GE already has applications that control processes, but Utterbeck hopes to see social interactions leveraged through Colab to improve productivity when snags arise. In essence, this would make Colab a transactional engine -- like [ERP](#) for the front-end of the business.

For example, when an employee encounters a problem during a particular process, they might start a chat with a co-worker or send an email to resolve it. All of this is useful information that GE's traditional collaboration system didn't capture in the past, he said. The challenge is to integrate the process applications into the social media environment and pair the problem that occurred in the business process with the social interactions that led to its resolution. "There's the opportunity we're looking at. How do we start to capture that social interaction so we can continuously evolve our processes," Utterbeck said.

Even the biggest social collaboration skeptics might be impressed to know that 60,000 of those 300,000 employees are invested users of the platform. This represents more than one-third of GE's 150,000 [knowledge workers](#), the company's target audience for Colab.

## Betting on social collaboration's enterprise value

There is palpable excitement in Utterbeck's voice when he shares those figures. The goal is to have 100,000 users by year's end, and he is confident Colab will hit its mark. Whether this bears out, GE is already on a promising track with relatively few peers.

The results of a [study issued last month by the McKinsey Global Institute](#) (MGI), the business and economics research arm of New York City-based management consultants McKinsey & Company Inc., suggests enterprise companies are failing to tap into the potential of social collaboration within the enterprise. For most companies, social efforts are more [customer-focused](#), the study shows. Yet by integrating [social collaboration technologies](#) into business processes, MGI predicts companies could raise the productivity of their knowledge workers by 20% to 25%. In the four sectors explored in the report -- consumer packaged goods, retail financial services, advanced manufacturing and professional services -- adding social technologies to business processes would drive \$900 billion and \$1.3 trillion in value, according to MGI.

GE is convinced of social collaboration's potential. Utterbeck won't say how much GE has invested in Colab, only going so far as to confirm "millions" would be in the ballpark. "I can tell you it's *a lot* less than what everybody thought," he said.

A strict [projection of ROI](#) was not a main concern. Senior leaders didn't need to be sold on the value of collaboration, Utterbeck said, because they see it in action. Making the collaborative process better and easier was an obvious move for a company whose processes are arguably the envy of the business world.

"One of the things that makes GE work is being able to collaborate across diverse business sets, and so from that perspective we've always looked at how do we get employees together to solve problems and share best practices," Utterbeck said. "So from an ROI perspective, we didn't spend any time figuring out the dollar nuts and bolts on this -- we know the value is there."

## A half-baked idea that really worked

No IT professional wants to release a solution that isn't fully baked, but Utterbeck said this divergence from the norm is making all the difference with Colab. Rather than plunk down a fully outfitted platform, his team played scientist and observer, releasing new features, then watching to see who was using what and responding promptly to [user feedback](#).

No one has to use this platform to do their day job; they use this platform because they can do their day job easier by linking in and networking with their peers.

Ron Utterbeck,  
corporate CIO, General Electric Co.

IT's prompt response in turn prompted mostly positive and constructive feedback. Early adopters were appreciative of the fresh features that were being added and tweaked according to their comments -- and let it be known to workmates. Indeed, word of mouth was critical to both recruiting new users and user adoption of the platform's growing array of features, Utterbeck said. As the benefits became apparent to one employee then another and another, their engagement with the platform increased.

"We'll introduce a new bit of functionality and then what we see is our usage goes up rather dramatically and continues to stay up, by the way," Utterbeck said.

Cisco's WebEx Social (formerly known as Quad) is the core engine of Colab. By leveraging the platform's [APIs](#), GE was able to extend the core functionality to make it its own and derive real business value, Utterbeck said. For example, search capabilities were beefed up by writing unique search algorithms -- the likes of which could lead one employee to another across that sea of 300,000.

Employees also did their part. The more users invest in Colab, the better the functionality, Utterbeck explained. At GE, files had long been searchable, but now they have the added feature of context. Knowing who produced a document, why it was created and what action it supported or decision it led to is part of the record. The knowledge of each individual is what makes the platform valuable.

The other killer feature of Colab is it incorporates communication modes that are now second nature to many employees. In short, GE has taken [Facebook and Twitter](#) functionality -- having friends and followers and the ability to directly communicate -- and put it on the PCs, laptops and mobile devices of employees. Whenever, wherever, employees log in, Colab is there on the desktop. For example, when a risk worker in Houston, Texas is seeking help and puts a question out there, a risk expert in India may hold the answer. For all intents and purposes they may as well be in the same office, Utterbeck said, that note of wonder again evident in his voice.

"What social media really brings to the way we're connecting from a collaboration perspective is the compression of time and space."

#### **More on social collaboration:**

In the wake of [Vanguard's enterprise 2.0](#), effort deep cultural changes

With new [enterprise collaboration platforms](#), 'social' means business

A note of caution? Clutter can quickly stifle participation in social collaboration, Utterbeck warned. Not all information pertains to every user. Endless update notices fill email boxes and eventually are ignored all together. In Colab, an array of opt-in notification features help keep users engaged because they're getting information they want and need.

Perhaps the most impressive thing about a social collaboration platform filled with impressive features is people actually use it -- and they don't have to. This is what Utterbeck finds most fascinating about the success of social collaboration at GE.

"We have over 60,000 of our employees using this platform on a daily basis; we've got over 3,000 groups that have been created on this platform with 15,000 things changing in those groups every individual day," Utterbeck said. "No one has to use this platform to do their day job; they use this platform because they can do their day job easier by linking in and networking with their peers."

*Let us know what you think about the story; email [Karen Goulart, Features Writer](#).*

All Rights Reserved, [Copyright 2007 - 2012](#), TechTarget | [Read our Privacy Statement](#)