



Explaining it to your grandmother | The Xpragmatic View



The Xpragmatic View #131
 November 16, 2009
 by [Marc Buyens \(@mbuyens\)](#), Xpragma
marc.buyens@xpragma.com
 url: <http://www.xpragma.com/view131.php>

If you can't explain it to your grandmother, forget it. This was written a couple of weeks ago on Twitter. It is a great call for simplicity but, in general, we humans do not really excel in responding to this call.

The Enterprise 2.0 conference in San Francisco is now history. For most participants, it was a great success. The number of implementations is increasing and we have a better understanding of what works and what doesn't.

At the same time, the discussion about the potential value or the non-value of the phenomenon continues. Today, we even see some polarisation of opinions, drifting apart in separate worlds.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with a confrontation of opinions. Normally, this will result in a better understanding. Unfortunately, we also see a lot of non-conversations, exchanging the same words but with different meanings or using arguments for the wrong reasons.

Interactions, emergence and structure

One of the reasons for this is the label "Enterprise 2.0". There has already been written a lot about the correct definition of it, so we won't repeat it here.

Still, the official Andrew McAfee definition is one of the main reasons for our non-conversation issue. Indeed, this definition largely fails to highlight the fundamental differences in the underlying principles of the various types of approaches that all fit the label "Enterprise 2.0".

As a result, it is rather pointless talking about the success or the failure of E2.0. Enterprise 2.0 covers so many fundamentally different things. Some of them are clear winners, for some other approaches...

So, while thinking about E2.0, we prefer looking at it in a different way, in a way that better highlights some of the essentials:

- Enterprise 2.0 is about fostering new or better interactions in a business context.
- New or better interactions can introduce emergent behaviour.
- Often, emergent behaviour will not be aligned with the existing business structure.

We repeat, this has not the ambition of being the better E2.0 definition. This only provides another view on the phenomenon that, we think, is a better basis for reflection. At least, we don't talk about software and we avoid using the word "social", which apparently has all types of meanings except the one that we need.

Not one size fits all

Now, there are likely better ways for doing this, but taking into account above mentioned dimensions of interaction, emergence and structure, we can roughly distinguish three categories of E2.0 solutions.

Specials

Starting a bit in reverse order, our first category are the "specials", the group of solutions that encompasses things such as crowdsourcing and prediction markets.

We call them "specials" since, compared to the freewheeling style of most Web 2.0 initiatives, these are very structured approaches. Interaction between the company and the participants is very formal and, in general, interaction between participants is non-existent. For certain approaches, the absence of such interaction is even a mandatory requirement.

As a result, emergence is nil. The final result is of course unknown, but the type of result we will get is something we expect. We can describe it and, when done well, we are likely to get it. It is almost like math.

As for the 'structure' dimension, no problem. These are initiatives that might touch specific departments, but they do not touch roles, authority, etc.

Social media

In this category, we group all the solutions that are "customer facing", where the interactions essentially occur between the company and its customers (or its target market).

In general, it is a few-to-many concept. A small team of employees will play the role of the enterprise. They might be visible to the outside world as individuals, yet they do not really act as individuals.

Here also, emergent behaviour is limited. The interaction between the customers and the company might lead to unexpected situations, but in general, it remains a rather controlled eco-system.

As for the 'structure' dimension, again, this does not lead to specific issues. This might touch certain departments but it does not really touch the current status quo.

Enterprise social platforms

Finally, the group of E2.0 solutions that are used behind the firewall, facilitating the interaction between employees. This is also the type of solutions most people have in mind when talking about E2.0.

Here, we are facing a completely different game. Here, we are talking about initiatives that, potentially, will have many-to-many interactions, strong emergent behaviour and that will run across the organisational structure.

Potentially.

Of course, these solutions can also be deployed in a more "controlled" way, which will reduce risks, but create less potential for breakthrough. Less a sales call.

Now, this is certainly not a perfect classification and nothing of this is any new, but in the discussions, people sometimes seem to forget these fundamental differences in the underlying mechanics. Fundamental differences that can result in substantially greater complexity and risk.

Unfortunately, in the "conversations" of the past weeks, we have often seen that the success of one type of initiative is used as the generic "proof" for the likely success of another, completely different, approach. That is not the type of discussion we need. Therefore, for the sake of the discussion, it would be better to stop using the generic E2.0 label and to make clear what we are really talking about.


We might not be able to explain it to our grandmother, but we must certainly not lie to her.

About the author



Marc Buyens is analyst, management consultant and owner of Xpragma. Marc started Xpragma in 1999 after a 20+ years career in the IT sector. Today, he provides advice, training and mentoring services focusing on the intersection of technological evolution, organisational change and business strategy: a messy world of unfulfilled promises.

 <http://www.facebook.com/marcb254>


 <http://www.linkedin.com/in/marcbuyens>


 <http://www.twitter.com/mbuyens>

© 1999-2010, Xpragma bvba. All Rights Reserved.

Xpragma bvba - Mechelsesteenweg 254 - 2820 Bonheiden - Belgium

Tel. +32-(0)15-340 845 - info@xpragma.com - www.xpragma.com

 RSS feed: <http://www.xpragma.com/english/rss/xpven.xml>

 RSS feed (full): http://www.xpragma.com/english/rss/xpv_full_en.xml