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## LEAPS AND BOUNDS

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# Beyond Water Cooler Talk

Airlines and other businesses can leverage virtual community networking opportunities through “cubeless” software, which enables employees to quickly receive answers to some of their most business-critical questions.

■ By Erik Johnson | *Ascend* Contributor

First we clicked. Next we surfed. Then we Googled. Now we're building communities. By now, this term for connecting with others in a virtual world has crept into our everyday vocabulary, thanks to Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook. And if you thought that virtual community networking was just for looking up long-lost friends, think again. Already, it has proven to be a very effective business networking tool through Web sites such as LinkedIn, a business-oriented networking site that allows registered users to post resumes and maintain a list of personal online connections with other friends and colleagues.

While many business people have been exposed to this virtual networking environment on a personal level to help them become the next-generation sales 2.0 salesperson, according to lead analysts, the next benefactor is the enterprise 2.0.

"Today's enterprise Web 2.0 market is small but growing," said an analyst with Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Forrester Research. "While the spending by enterprise-class companies — firms with 1,000 or more employees — will touch US\$764 million in 2008, the collected expenditure on social networking — RSS, wikis, blogs, mashups, podcasting and widgets — will

grow at a compound annual rate of 43 percent during the next five years."

So what does that mean for airlines and virtually any other types of business? It means that they are looking for ways to bring their employees together and share information in a new, boundless environment that was once served by the water cooler. As many airlines and the businesses they partner with have grown into global enterprises, their employees are now dispersed on multiple continents, multiple remote locations — in the office, on the road and in the home. While it definitely has cost- and time-saving advantages, the dispersed workforce has made it more difficult for companies to collaborate, aggregate and dispense critical business knowledge while keeping a real-time pulse on the operations of the business.

New research shows the financial and opportunity cost of a dispersed workforce. For example, recent research from Framingham, Massachusetts-based IDC indicated that up to 30 percent of a knowledge worker's time is spent searching for information — at an average cost of US\$18,000 per year for each employee. This data begs the question of whether or not enterprises have become too global.



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Global companies that have employees spread around the world can take advantage of technology that enables collaboration and knowledge sharing via a virtual environment with unlimited access.

Sabre Travel Studios within *Sabre Holdings*® asked this very question of its own employees and discovered a need to engage each other in a new kind of water cooler talk. It discovered that this new collaboration shouldn't take place in the limited confines of a conference room or even in an Internet meeting. This building of community and sharing of employee knowledge needed to take place in a virtual environment, with no cubes, no conference rooms and no restrictions on access. This new sense of community was born in the cubeless world, bringing to life the community-building system for companies — appropriately named cubeless.

What is cubeless? Simply stated, it's an online community platform solution that enables a company to tap into the collective intelligence of its employees. The system harnesses the untapped skills and knowledge of employees to more quickly and efficiently bring together the right people, information and resources necessary to answer questions and solve business challenges.

At the core of cubeless is a powerful, proprietary relevance engine that ensures that questions being asked or information being sought by employees are proactively delivered directly to those in the company who are most likely to have the answers or need the information. The more questions and answers



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**Employees, no matter where they work, can quickly and easily gain knowledge about an array of topics through a virtual environment, saving time and money for them and the companies they support.**

provided, the smarter the system gets at matching the right people with the right situations. In addition, an easy-to-use browsing tool and a full-feature search engine enables users to find exactly what

and who they require when they need those resources the most.

The benefits of cubeless are limitless, but first and foremost, cubeless builds a strong sense of company culture. It's an inclusive style of technology that allows for internal networking and placement of a face and personality to names and titles. Cubeless also provides an easy-to-use application for capturing, storing and making internal knowledge easily accessible from within a single place in real time. It also minimizes new-hire ramp time, reduces communication lag time between employees, drives collaboration across organizations and encourages innovation by enabling users to contribute, post and act on new concepts.

Most of all, cubeless is fun and easy to use. Because networking systems are most valuable when adopted by the largest group of users possible, cubeless was designed specifically to be a system that employees look forward to using every day. It aims to provide value to the organization in a manner sometimes transparent to the user. The pictures and personal sticky notes employees can leave for each other make cubeless a system users quickly embrace and provide a platform that employees value.

Because it is easy to use, cubeless delivers value to just about any department within an organization, from sales

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**In previous years, it was common for employees to huddle around the water cooler to have myriad business discussions. But today's global companies have personnel stationed in all corners of the world, making many of these in-person conversations a thing of the past.**



and human resources to logistics and accounting. All of these departments can share best practices and answer business-critical questions from across the organization. Even specialized groups, such as aircraft mechanics, can benefit from cubeless as employees post the latest inspection information or can help direct each other to corporate policy as well as internal or external resources.

Cubeless is also a good tool to use if an airline's corporate communications team is looking for success stories to profile in its employee publication. They could simply post a question throughout the organization using cubeless. Or if a vice president was attending an industry conference in another city and needed to plan a special customer dinner during this conference, cubeless presents a great resource for discovering what other sales professional in the organization found to be the best restaurants in that area for hosting customer events. Perhaps human resources plans to roll out and track a new walking program for employees and wants to set up teams for a little friend-

*Network*<sup>®</sup> and *Sabre Airline Solutions*<sup>®</sup> businesses. "For those folks that the road is as much their office as where their desk is, getting information they know they can trust is simply invaluable.

"Cubeless facilitates this collaboration so the road warrior business traveler can quickly, easily and even automatically get advice from people within their company that do what they do, have the same travel policies and have been in the same locations providing their best resource for getting input about their trip. It can be anything from finding out about services to help support their business trip in a location others have visited and which nearby restaurants are open all night for a quick bite to verifying that a hotel they want to stay in has dependable, fast wireless Internet access and a gym that is open early in the morning."

This licensed software is provided to airlines and other businesses as a service; therefore, most of the implementation and maintenance responsibility for the cubeless system resides with *Sabre Holdings*. It is hosted behind a

more than 300 groups have been formed since the launch of SabreTown.

"In our own installation of cubeless, I have been amazed by the quantity and breadth of stories we receive every week, letting us know how someone has been helped by our cubeless system, SabreTown," Klein said. "It seems every week another group of individuals finds new ways for SabreTown to help them work smarter."

In one recent example, a group within *Sabre Holdings* needed to find an Italian translator for an upcoming customer visit. Before they spent the money to hire a translator, they posted the need to SabreTown. Within a day, they found an employee, located within the same office building, who spoke fluent Italian and was honored to have the opportunity to help the company with his unique skill. The same week, an employee needed to get a file that was important to her job ported from one format to another, but didn't know how. The original file format was not supported by the company, so in this case the help desk couldn't assist. She posted the question to the community and received several how-to responses, including one employee from a nearby department who volunteered to help walk her through the process, giving her access to the file and saving her countless hours of trial-and-error or the cost of going outside the company.

Cubeless was officially released to the marketplace on June 2. In future releases, cubeless will also continue to add deeper functionality in areas most used for business purposes, including richer opportunities to rate and recommend restaurants, hotels and activities in any city for business or leisure purposes as well as additional ways for employees across the organization to help each other work better. And, maybe, even have a little fun while they are at it. **F**

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**HIGHlight**

## The benefits of cubeless are limitless, but first and foremost, cubeless builds a strong sense of company culture.

ly competition. Cubeless would enable employees around the world to stay connected with their teams.

The ability to manage complex data and present relevant and usable information to the end user is in the DNA of all *Sabre Holdings* solutions, and its developers utilized this history and success to ensure that the information collected by the cubeless system is easily translated into action and results. This type of solution proves to be especially relevant to airline and travel companies, most of which have large and largely dispersed workforces.

"Cubeless enables you to connect and benefit from the collective experience and expertise of your fellow travelers or colleagues," said Tom Klein, executive vice president for *Sabre Holdings* and group president of the *Sabre Travel*

secure firewall to ensure that only the company's employees have access to the information on its installation of cubeless. *Sabre Holdings* has a history of securely maintaining mission-critical corporate information and will leverage this capability in the cubeless system.

*Sabre Holdings* launched the first cubeless community for its own internal use, calling the intranet-based tool SabreTown. Within three months of installation, 65 percent of its employees completed an online profile. On average, 90 percent of all questions asked within the community receive the first response within the first 24 hours (60 percent receive the first answer in less than an hour), and each question posed to the community receives an average of nine responses, often with respondents building on each other's answers. In addition,