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Creating an Engaged and Productive Workforce in Small Businesses using Cloud Computing: A Literature Review

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***Abstract*— Employee engagement is one way to keep small teams as productive as possible, especially when resources are tight. Small businesses have an advantage of naturally being a highly agile and engaging workplace by taking advantage of cloud computing. This is one way they can overcome the resource limitations they typically face. Work and life balance, collaboration, feedback, and recognition are discussed and demonstratively enhanced through the use of cloud computing using models. The tools exhibited in this paper are intentionally low cost and accessible to businesses with limited resources.**

***Keywords*—** Cloud Computing, Workforce Productivity, Small Business, Literature Review.

I. INTRODUCTION

Small businesses seeking a talented and educated workforce commonly face an uphill battle to retain top talent, especially when large companies have statistically better benefits over small companies [10, 25]. Making the workplace more engaging is one way to effectively retain talent.

The direct relation between productivity and engagement was studied by Endres and Mancheno-Smoak [11]. This knowledge, coupled by the research of Vaijayanthi, Shreenivasan, and Prabhakaran [30] which identify individuals with longer tenure as being highly engaged, should then be a signifier of increased productivity in longer tenure employees. It is the belief of the writer that leveraging cloud based solutions can help create an engaging workplace in a cost effective method thereby increasing the retention of new talent and amplifying the productivity along the way.

This paper integrates employee engagement to cloud computing, which includes both applications and methodology. The psychological elements of employee engagement focused on include: feedback, collaboration, recognition, as well as work and life balance. Secondly, the research will identify cloud based tools and technologies that positively affect those elements. Third, based on those findings, a model will be developed that can be directly applied to small businesses. Concluding the literature study will be a discussion on the application of the model previously developed, as well as suggestions for further research..

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Work and Life Balance

The balance between work and life can increase employee productivity and loyalty to the company; it does this by increasing employee job satisfaction and morale through flexibility [21]. According to Dash, Anand, and Gangadharan [8] neither position in the company, age, nor tenure contribute to significantly change the perception of work and life balance. Bird [3] notes that work and life balance is a primary contributor to make the Forbes "Best Companies to Work For" list, and therefore it is prudent for small businesses to pay it careful attention. Nemani [24] describes that cloud computing, both Software as a Service (SaaS) and Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS), has the ability to provide tools to make working from anywhere simple and convenient, and therefore, increases the flexibility needed to provide a good balance between work and life. Figure 1 depicts the relationship that can form between cloud computing and work and life balance.

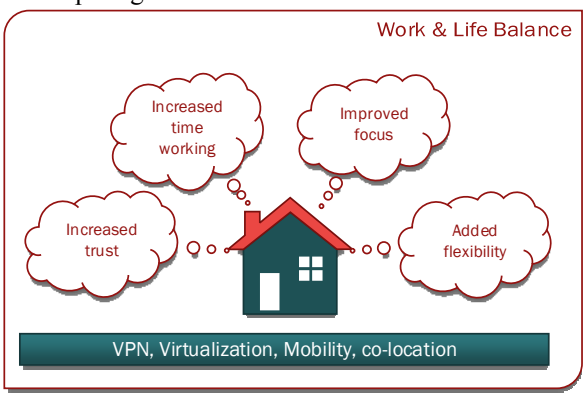

Figure 1. Work and life balance, technical foundation and related traits.

The concept of working anywhere, anytime, from any device is a core technical activator of work and life balance. Providing the flexibility for employees to work from multiple locations improves commitment to the company and productivity [18]. Sivasankaran [29] describes the internal Cisco work environment where she notes that 40% of employees are not in the same location as their manager and the average employee telecommutes two days a week. The ability to telecommute several days a week greatly

reduces commuting time, which is then spent as 60% work time and 40% personal time. In this situation, both work and life benefit from telecommuting options. Leveraging SaaS and virtual private network (VPN) solutions for enterprise systems is an obvious choice for providing accessibility from anywhere. Furthermore, with the advancement of virtualization technology, organizations can virtualize nearly any office worker's environment, including the most resource intensive jobs such as Computer-aided Design (CAD) using the Citrix XenDesktop HDX 3D environment.

Lines will blur when trying to separate work from life and it is important for the worker who works irregular hours to show his or her engagement and productivity in tangible ways. With improved work visibility there is better communication between supervisors and their employees and the reduced chance of an overload of work. Monitoring work, tracking progress, and improving collaborative team work reduces the risk of abrupt changes in workload, which can negatively affect performance [28].

Collaboration

Collaboration involves teamwork, communication, project management, awareness, and a myriad of other group and individual skills. In order to collaborate effectively a team no longer needs to be in the same building, or the same country for that matter, but communication remains a necessity. Communication is the heart of collaboration and many cloud based tools hosted locally or on the internet can be used to facilitate it, as summarized in Figure 2.

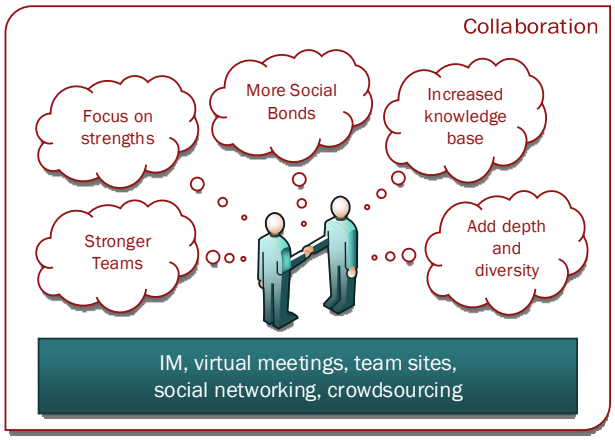

Figure 2. Collaboration, technical foundation and related traits.

These tools include instant messaging, virtual meetings, and team forums. On the other hand, without proper implementation, promotion and buy-in, these tools may not provide the value they promise. Instant messaging (IM) is a SaaS solution that can be hosted internally or via public services such as Skype. It is frequently regarded as a distraction that causes interruptions in the workplace the same way as a phone call or email would. However, Garrett and Danziger [13] confirmed that IM does not increase interruptions; in fact, IM reduces interruptions when used to communicate between co-workers. In general, IM conversations are shorter and more directed than face to face alternatives; this truth carries over to online meetings.

Meetings that use SaaS meeting hosting services such as GotoMeeting or WebEx also create more effective meetings than those traditionally held in a conference room [15]. In a series of tests, Hatem et al [15] created a controlled environment that monitored meetings on the same topic both online and in person and found that online meetings were more effective and productive because they were more focused and task driven. Participants in virtual meetings feel that there is less need to discuss non-relevant material during such meetings which leads to a more productive and shorter meeting. It may however, have some drawbacks.

Instant messaging, online meetings, and virtual conferences do not always make for a highly productive workplace. A reduction in small talk is considered the biggest challenge as well as the biggest benefit of online communication. Communication drives relationship, therefore the organization must create new, more deliberate avenues to create those relationships amongst team members.

Creating teams. Due to a small company's potentially limited human resources opening the traditional borders of the local community can be beneficial. A new level of depth and diversity to the corporate knowledge base can be obtained through virtual organizations and knowledge sharing outside the company [6]. Internet collaboration and team building can alleviate difficulties employees experience in other mediums, due to cost or other constraints. Take for example the Blackboard service, which may provide a good workspace for education but perhaps not for the corporate world; in that case, Microsoft SharePoint or Yammer may be better suited. Team sites that pull in the functionality of multiple applications like Yammer are attractive because they eliminate the frustration of finding the right enterprise tool for the right job. For instance, integrating Spigit (spigit.com) as well as SharePoint and over a dozen other applications is beneficial. Tight social application integrations eliminate the need for multiple open applications thus making the work experience more streamlined. This ultimately makes workers more productive because information and collaboration nearly always are present.

Social knowledge and crowdsourcing. Social networking can be defined as connecting with personal friends and professional colleagues on the internet to share information of all types. Crowdsourcing uses large groups of people to collect ideas and generally collaborate on projects online instead of via a traditional employee or supplier scenario. Facebook and similar online communities are a stepping stone in human communications similar to historical breakthroughs like the telephone, and are leading to new unprejudiced interaction between individuals and groups across the globe[7]. Asking friends on Facebook a question that begins with "Can someone give me some advice on…" or "What do you think about…" typically generates a flood of responses and initiates a conversation if the topic is interesting or controversial enough. A simple demonstration of this was done in relation to this survey where the following question was asked: "What are some of the best ways your supervisor has appreciated you at work?" Within 24 hours, 10 public responses were received and one private message; the first 9 responses can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Validation of social networking via Facebook.

With a small business the crowd is smaller so asking questions in a corporate social network may not get the response rate that a larger enterprise might. The overall benefit of crowdsourcing comes in the form of results and feedback from a large number of mostly anonymous individuals; a team impossible to duplicate within the small business. The cloud provides a platform, as demonstrated in services such as uTest (utest.com) and Amazon Mechanical Turk (https://www.mturk.com), for all businesses to outsource jobs to the masses or to a focused group in order to get a job done in a cost effective manner.

Feedback

Feedback is defined here as the flow of information between the individual and the source based on the action that the employee performs. Cloud computing takes feedback to a higher level with its tightly integrated devices and instant feedback to the user's life that will improve productivity and decision making in the office worker as well as the remote worker, as visualized in figure 4. Understanding that feedback is necessary comes with the need to understand the value of anonymous feedback.

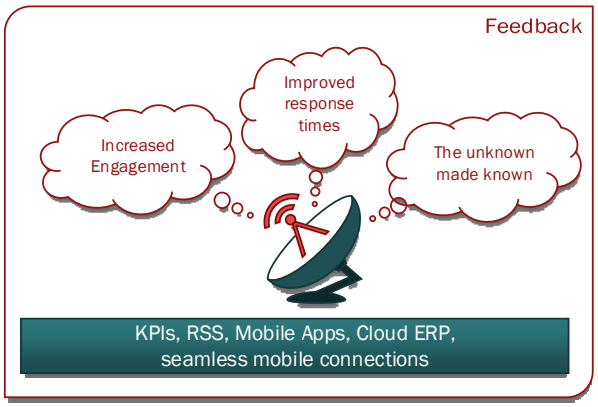

Figure 4. Feedback, technical foundation and related traits.

Anonymity promotes feedback and since feedback is one of the drivers of engagement, it only makes sense to conduct a short discussion on anonymous feedback and the systems that support it. Berg [2] discusses the value of anonymity in creating a multicultural virtual organization because it eliminates bias and prejudice thereby placing team members on a level playing field. Instead of physical appearance, knowledge and ability are used to judge potential participation and team members are recruited using those factors. Using anonymity in a virtual organization also works to eliminate bias by eliminating thoughts about intelligence, education, position in the organizational hierarchy or any other identifier which may make them more or less respected in a face-to-face team. The feedback is even more impactful when it can be received instantly as seen in Twitter (twitter.com) and reddit (reddit.com).

There is a call to make information, from business metrics to personal feedback, more visible and more instantaneous. Aggregating business intelligence in a way similar to Flipboard is the next logical step in business knowledge retrieval [16]. With advances in mobile technology there is an expectation of instant feedback from the latest news, weather, sports scores, and any other interest. SaaS solutions may be a way to offset the resource constraints that cause information bottlenecks seen in small businesses.

Taking cues from the aforementioned mobile systems, small businesses should investigate systems that provide users with information on their mobile devices. Using web-based apps that interface with existing enterprise systems gives individuals immediate access to information that typically would be restricted to onsite connections or VPNs. By providing seamless integrations to applications through unified security and credentials, individuals will experience an integrated environment that provides them not only common information but also common tools across platforms.

A VPN provides the most convenient solution to accessibility and transparent connectivity. Transparent connectivity and mesh networks allow a device to connect seamlessly and reliably to the organization. One Platform as a Service (PaaS) solution by Meraki (meraki.com) provides a scalable solution of services and security appliances for small businesses. Providing the infrastructure for a strong and reliable connection to corporate data from anywhere in the world is critical, provided that security and auditing is handled properly.

Recognition

Recognition has been identified as a critical contributor to employee engagement and organizational effectiveness [19]. The engagement level of an employee directly relates to the level of acknowledgement of his or her value to the team [12]. Their recognition also coincides with the benefits they obtain by being a part of such a community. Through peer recognition and rewards for contributions, the person will be more prone to continue to engage. Contribution is directly related to reward through acknowledgement, and acknowledgement and appreciation of the contribution cannot be understated.

Accomplishments and acknowledgement systems are enhanced with systems from Spigit and Kudos (kudosnow.com). SpigitEngage (www.spigit.com/products /spigitengage/), available as a SaaS solution, tracks participation in innovation activities and rewards

individuals based on peer feedback as well as their own participation. Kudos is a SaaS solution that lets employees recognize their peers and in turn rewards the recipients with points that can be redeemed through a reward program or catalog. Mobile solutions exist for both systems and many similar systems are appearing. SaaS provides a low cost of entry and makes rewards and recognition systems easy to implement for small businesses, as seen in Figure 5. These systems can also provide a level of accountability.

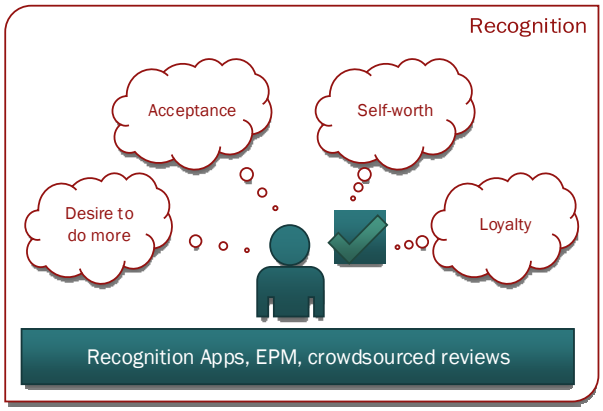

Figure 5. Recognition, technical foundation and related traits.

Accountability

Rashad, Asad, and Ashraf [26] identified that performance appraisals and testing do not positively affect employee engagement. On the other hand, Greve [14] discusses how performance feedback is necessary but that it must reflect corporate strategy. Employees typically react to an annual or bi-annual review with negativity. In recognition of this fact, Mosley [23], CEO of Globoforce, suggests crowdsourcing employee reviews. By using information such as achievements captured in social recognition crowdsourcing, it encourages inspirational reviews instead of those captured by checkboxes and obligation. When reviews are optional only those who have something to say really say it. If someone receives no reviews in a generally popular crowdsourcing review system it may symbolize that something is wrong with the performance of that particular employee. Recognizing people on a project level works in a similar way.

Focusing on project accountability as opposed to overall performance improves employee engagement according to Rashad, Asad, and Ashraf [26]. Task progression and enterprise project management (EPM) tools are therefore important so long as they are simple and require only a few minutes per day. People desire to be held accountable because it clarifies expectations and drives them to meet the goals set out before them. A quick internet search turns up a multitude of project management services that provide project tracking solutions, many of which are free, suiting well a small business.

Literature Gaps

To this point in time, academic research has focused on employee engagement or on cloud computing, but has seldom combined the two. Perhaps this is because it is assumed knowledge, or is identified in customer testimonials of cloud providers that are far from objective in character. This gap is widened by an academic focus on enterprise level organizations rather than on the small companies. Moreover, most academic research has been isolated to certain geographical regions, bringing cultural and work ethic differences to the table, without looking at a global cross section. The author has taken great effort to integrate research from all parts of the world to make this project as valid as possible.

With advances in technology small businesses have many tools at their disposal to create engaging workplaces at a low cost using SaaS solutions. This will in turn increase productivity and employee retention as employees will be able to work wherever they chose with limited disruption to their routines. In fact, in some cases employees may see an improvement to their productivity and overall happiness. The following model lays out a clear illustration of what an environment of this sort might look like.

III. DISCUSSION

The foundation of a full cloud based system for employee engagement is visible in Figure 6.

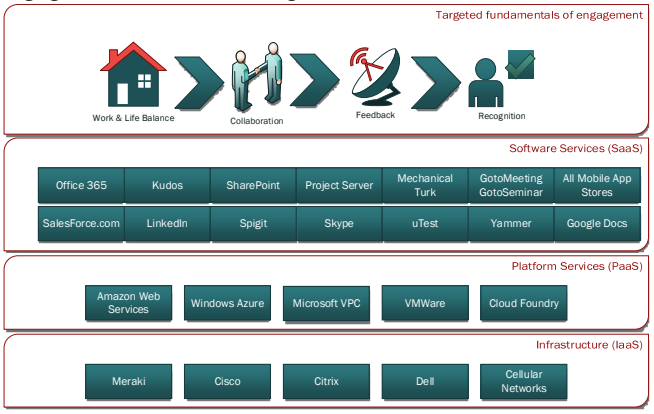

Figure 6. Foundational technology and combined model

The model proposes implementing a series of SaaS, PaaS, and IaaS tools in order to achieve the goals of meeting the four characteristics this paper has been discussing. The named tools represent a fraction of the tools available and should not be considered an exhaustive list of options, but merely a subsection for demonstration. Furthermore, the tools and technologies presented can and do overlap into other areas of engagement, which is why it is impossible to silo them into certain engagement theories.

The IaaS layer provides the hardware and infrastructure needed to support remote access and mobility. Cisco's Meraki product line provides small businesses IaaS hardware for small businesses where Cisco and Citrix provide scalable solutions for larger organizations. The infrastructure is a critical success factor when creating private cloud environments and therefore must be evaluated for suitability based on a business's unique needs. PaaS provides a platform and base framework to use in the cloud that lets users install applications and services as if they were working on their a private desktop or server. Many businesses create a private cloud by hosting their own virtualized environments for servers, however virtualization is easily done in the public cloud as well. A pay-for-use model is an easy sell for small businesses, but large enterprises may save money implementing their own environments.

Selecting the right software for the right business need is also important when looking at software. For example, after a rigorous needs analysis and selection process, a company focusing on improving employee recognition might select Kudos or the SpigitEngage product though probably not both. SaaS is at the heart of functionality when discussing tools that encourage and improve employee engagement.

Low Cost Ideas for the Small Business

Implementing a variety of tools to amplify engagement from all of the directions noted in this paper will be a complex endeavour. However, it does not have to be financially burdensome. Several technical tools are suggested here that have low financial cost but potentially high returns.

VPN and co-location.

Most companies already have a VPN solution and may not even know it. Microsoft servers have historically come preloaded with a VPN solution, although that solution is not considered optimal. Better solutions can be found in the open source community in projects such as OpenVPN. SonicWall also offers VPN solutions for small businesses at a low cost of entry, bundling firewall functionality into the same piece of hardware. Using a remote desktop protocol (RDP), preinstalled in all Microsoft Windows professional operating systems, gives the organization an automatic ability to create a remote workforce without major cost. Take advantage of technology and relax the time-clock.

Instant messaging.

Take advantage of IM and social collaboration. Many instant messaging services are free or are relatively inexpensive to both personal and business users. They have been proven to increase productivity as noted previously, and thus GotoMeeting, Skype, LinkedIn Groups, and other IM services are an easy productivity boost. Use external communities to increase knowledge base and create partnerships through structured communication and crowdsourcing.

Utilize best practices and out-of-the-box metrics.

Implement out-of-the-box metrics properly from accounting, Customer Relations Management (CRM) and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software. Utilize best practices that are generally built into these systems. In the long run this will be cheaper than customizing to current practices and organizations may find themselves in a better position as they understand the reason why a certain practice is considered best. It is also the observation of the author that many companies implement business systems so that core functionality is available, but they neglect the added benefit of reporting and metrics. Complete the project and reap the rewards of an expensive ERP to achieve immediate results with no extra upfront costs.

Recognition.

Crowdsource recognition by creating a SharePoint site or use Yammer or LinkedIn. Simple public recognition for a job well done goes a long way in aiding employee retention. Applying a simple rewards and recognition program can also be put in place using a platform like SharePoint. One idea would be to implement a system whereby points are allocated to employees based on their achievements, thus adding gameplay to recognition.

Risk Management-Work and Life Balance.

The freedom found in working whenever and wherever is a significant risk to productivity and self-motivation is necessary for remote workers in order to combat it [31]. EPM and accountability tools previously discussed reduce the impact of this risk [1]. Using instant messaging tools such as Skype and Lync, the employee can establish an online presence so that the rest of the team knows when the individual is actively working.

Rewards and Recognition.

The risks in celebrating achievements lies in the fine line of gauging what is the right amount of recognition and when it should be applied. Give too much recognition, and it loses meaning; too little and its worth cannot be seen and tool goes unused. Recognition must be authentic and specific to the person. Employees may not view the same form of recognition in the same ways. For example, one person may appreciate a free lunch whereas another desires verbal recognition from upper management.

Collaboration.

Establishing relationships in an environment where remote work is encouraged can be difficult, but they are very important for highly productive teams. Create an environment where remote workers can collaborate and spend time together to build those relationships [1]. Encourage versus textual communications whenever possible and create events where remote workers can present and participate with each other [31]. Establishing a team operating agreement to clarify communication guidelines may also reduce the risk of miscommunication in the virtual team.

Feedback.

Cloud computing provides a useful medium for presenting information to all users, mobile or not. However, as the information starts flowing, the risk of information overload can be realized. By fully understanding the end users questions and unique roles, we can partially mitigate that risk, and presenting them with the right amount of quality information at the right time.

Gaps Analysis

Much of the technologies applied to engagement concepts have not been objectively and systematically evaluated to determine if they actually increase engagement. It is in fact the work environment the technology facilitates that does this, and thus other non-cloud based systems could be used to create similar results. This paper provides cloud based methods to achieve an engaged workplace. There are a multitude of technical solutions for the problems addressed in this paper and only a small portion are represented within. It is then the reader's responsibility to apply his or her own due diligence in order to objectively review and compare products that fit the company's needs. This review is blind to any generational challenges that internet use could bring over more traditional models of engagement and thus, for simplicity, assumes all employees and businesses will experience the same positive results. Businesses will also experience varying results based on their own change management processes and strategies. This review also assumes a common understanding of cloud computing, which can be found in the National Institute of Standards and Technology's definition [22].

Limitations

This research is limited by the fact that it is not intended to be a fully developed empirical study and further work in that area is recommended. The scope of research is further narrowed by focusing on small companies as well as jobs that lend themselves to a work environment that can take full advantage of cloud computing. For example, a manufacturing team has different requirements than does a software development group and hence there should be different tools in place to engage employees. Another limitation is the lack of research on cloud computing and how it affects employee engagement, which is one reason why this project was written.

This project presents academic literature and marries it to cloud computing and certain example applications. Therefore, any software and technology referred to in this review should be reviewed and evaluated extensively by the organization for its particular need, along with competitors' products. No original empirical research was conducted for this study. The knowledge presented represents previous academic literature, case studies from credible sources, and the authors' personal experiences.

Future Research Opportunities

The objectivity of the research and white papers noted by many cloud service providers is questionable due to bias. Therefore, there is a significant research opportunity to validate those claims through objective third party study, which will add significant value to the field of using technology to enhance employee engagement. A second opportunity resides in creating implementation strategies that recommend strategies for the various generations of employees. The theory is that Generation X and forward will be more prone to embrace the concepts presented in this project, as opposed to earlier generations, which may struggle with them more; this theory has yet to be proven.

IV. CONCLUSION

Engagement and cloud computing work well together and have a good synergy. Work and life balance is easily obtained when enhanced by cloud based tools such as a VPN and cloud based ERPs. Collaboration is amplified through online meetings, instant messaging, and crowdsourcing. Feedback is improved by providing useful and relevant reporting through real time reporting on the web and in mobile applications. Recognition is made visible and applied through programs like Kudos.

Small businesses should be on the leading edge of creating engaging environments for their employees as a means to attracting and retaining talent. This can be done with minimal resources using cloud computing due to low cost subscription or free open source models used by many of the services described in this paper. The small business also has an advantage of being able to establish relationships throughout the organization more quickly than can larger organizations and by doing so, create more collaborative and agile workplaces.

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