



Illinois Association of School Administrators Creates Professional Community for Superintendents Using OpenText Social Workplace

Secure social collaboration software connects people and content in community-based environment

Industry

Education

Customer



Business Challenge

- Listserv email not an efficient way to capture knowledge base
- Ineffective collaboration on ideas, opinions, experiences, and content for future reference
- No way to easily search historical content
- Required a platform to increase communication within the association

Business Solution

OpenText Social Workplace

Business Benefits

- Users have one central repository for capturing, sharing, and preserving knowledge
- Social media offers a more productive environment than email for effective communication
- Communities facilitate collaboration, organization, aggregation, and iteration of information
- Ease of use and adoption
- Hosted solution is easy to deploy and minimal training is required

The Illinois Association of School Administrators (IASA) is the premier advocacy organization for school administrators in the state. Since 1946, the IASA has offered Illinois school administrators the opportunity to join with colleagues throughout the state to improve the quality of public education in Illinois and to maintain the high standards of their profession. To encourage better networking and communication between the superintendents, the IASA is using OpenText Social Workplace, a secure, collaborative environment that enhances the ability of superintendents to come together to communicate and share information through discussions and document sharing—anytime, anywhere.

Background

IASA offers a variety of professional enhancement and resource services to its members including professional and legal assistance, a return of dues program, conferences, and professional development programs. The association was using a Listserv mailing list as a communication vehicle for its members. This mode of communication is opt-in, and email sent to the IASA Listserv is automatically distributed to members on the mailing list. While the IASA Listserv offers participants the ability to exchange ideas and research, it does not offer members an effective way to easily capture this knowledge base of ideas, opinions, experiences, and content for future reference.

“Somebody will initiate a discussion or state a problem, and then others will respond. However, the problem with the Listserv is usually the person who stated the problem then collects the documentation and sends it out to the group, but there’s nowhere to find that information. If a superintendent had the same problem six months later, it would be very difficult to remember who researched it, found the information, and put it back out in the Listserv,” states Dr. Richard Voltz, Associate Director, Illinois Association of School Administrators. “We do have a repository of documents that we’ve been keeping on our server at IASA, but it’s very difficult to search. I don’t think very many superintendents go to our repository of documents.”

“The other issue with the Listserv is that even though someone may respond to a discussion, sometimes they will just respond to the person initiating the discussion, so no one else will see the email thread unless the person who did the original post reposted all the answers,” adds Voltz.

In addition to the Listserv mailing list, the IASA issues a weekly newsletter to all superintendents on a variety of topics as well as bulletins or special email notices for professional training seminars. Members can also find information on the IASA homepage (<http://www.iasaedu.org/>), “however, I don’t think a lot of people are going to the homepage on a regular basis to get information,” says Voltz.

Voltz also posts several tweets daily on Twitter and Facebook to get information out but finds that it’s difficult to monitor how many people are actually getting that information and using it.





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Dr. Richard Voltz,
Associate Director, Illinois Association of School Administrators

The IASA's goal with OpenText Social Workplace was to combine the community-based aspects of Twitter and Facebook with the email communication that the Listserv provides and start a community of users that could come together in a secure, private environment. “The repository of documents we've been keeping on our server would be available in the Social Workplace community spaces, based on the topic of interest. For example, a discussion that's hot in education right now is bullying. Maybe somebody has a bullying policy or has dealt with a bullying issue. That becomes a community of information about bullying. It might not interest me now, but in six or twelve or eighteen months from now, it might, and I could go into the community and find that information,” explains Voltz.

With Social Workplace, content is organized in specific communities by subject matter, enabling users to quickly focus on the information that is most important to them and reducing the volume of emails sent and forwarded among groups. Generated content such as discussions, ask/answer queries, documents, and so on are immediately accessible to a wide network of stakeholders, significantly reducing the email burden and opening up new communication channels.

“Every two years, we elect school board members,” says Voltz. “Since I do a lot of work with new superintendents, they ask me questions about how we seat new school board members and how we elect school board member officers. I have a podcast network, and I did a podcast on this topic two years ago. You could find it in the podcast network, but you'd have to know it was there and go back and look in the archives to be able to find it. Whereas, using Social Workplace, if there was a community concerning school board election or election of school board officers, then that information stays in the community, and people would know where to get it.”

OpenText Social Workplace offers effective way to capture knowledge base

Social Workplace helps organizations become more effective by putting the expertise and effort of the entire workforce at everyone's fingertips.

“We are a huge, diverse state. We have the Chicago Public School system with 425,000 students, and we have one school district in Illinois that is a K-8 District with 87 students. So, we go large, small,

rural, suburban, urban, and have a pretty big footprint as well. But that doesn't mean we can't learn from each other,” says Voltz. “This is what I am trying to get people to do with Social Workplace; learn from each other. It doesn't matter if you are big or small. You might have a similar problem.”

Social Workplace brings together all of the social tools that have defined the modern Internet into a safe, organizational framework. The Profiles feature automatically generates a rich, descriptive profile for every user. Members to the site can edit their own profiles, add a photo, update their status, and view other people's profiles.

“One of the things I like about the site is the ability to include your picture with your profile. I think it is really important because often times you meet lots of people, but you might not remember their name. Pictures can certainly help get you back lined up with the person,” says Voltz.

When a member enters information into their profile, they are telling people who they are and what their interests are. They also have the ability to share more information by way of their blog. All of the information entered into someone's profile and blog is indexed to make it easy for other people to follow them and for members to discover others of like interests. When posting a blog, users can add tags to their posts that make it easier for others to discover this information.

If a superintendent has a particular topic they are interested in, they can do a search for information related to it. For example, by entering the phrase “professional development” in the search field, the entire system will be searched and the requestor is presented with not only content, but people and communities that have a connection with professional development. By scrolling over the name or image of a person, a mini profile is displayed showing who the person is and some key fields from their profile including their status message and the option to follow them.

Working together more effectively

The IASA Social Workplace went live in February 2011. Within two months, around 10 percent of the 900 superintendents were actively participating and sharing information and opinions, and another 25 to 30 percent were signing in and checking it out.



"Superintendents know that this is a safe place to go to share information. It's new; we just have to keep on working at it to get the message out," says Voltz. "A lot of the conversation and collaboration that has happened already I don't think would have happened in a more open forum social media product like Facebook or Twitter."

Prior to launching Social Workplace, Voltz worked with OpenText consultants to create and pre-populate about 17 communities in the IASA Social Workplace and mapped them to the desktops of every member by default. Then an email was sent out to everybody to encourage them to log in. Some of the communities are Education and Legislation, Public Relations, Referendum Resources Documents, School Finance, School Safety, and Strategic Planning. The communities were all pre-populated with documents so when the superintendents logged in for the first time, they found communities with content they would find useful.

When a superintendent logs in, they will see on their home screen any new communities that have been added to their Communities area and people they decided to follow have been added to their People list. They will immediately be able to see if the people they are following have been active. If there is a red badge with a number beside the person's name, it means that the person has new blog entries that the superintendent has not yet read. With one click, the superintendent can go directly to the blog where they can view, read, and respond to the blog entry.

Some communities are private, so users may need to first ask for permission before they can see the content.

Hosted environment meets the needs of the organization

Since the IASA Social Workplace is a web-accessible solution hosted on OpenText servers, this means there is no software to install, no server to set up and configure, and no internal IT support required. Benefits include rapid deployment, minimal start-up costs, and 24/7 support.

"We're a small operation here," says Voltz, "and we do not have a full-time technology person available to administer the system." The IASA benefits from the fact that the hosted solution can quickly provide a sophisticated shared workspace without the need for internal IT support and resources. "From our perspective, it's really been seamless. The support from the hosting, in my opinion, is well worth the cost," states Voltz.

Engaging new members

Once the IASA Social Workplace was up and running, Voltz identified several opportunities to promote the new site to membership. He gives demonstrations about the site at all the superintendent meetings he attends. "In addition, our marketing people made up a postcard that we mailed out to the membership reminding them of the site



and encouraging them to come and check it out," Voltz says.

"Another thing I do is whenever a superintendent puts something out on the IASA Listserv, I send them an email and suggest that they also put that communication in the IASA Social Workplace, and most do that."

To assist people in the initial set up, OpenText consultants created a series of training videos. The two- to-four-minute videos cover logging in, profile and status, discovering people and content, communities and subscriptions, creating their own communities, and setting permissions.

"So far, we've had approximately 25 to 30 percent of the IASA membership log in and make changes to their profile," says Voltz. "I think we're going to continue to see growth due to the various ways we're promoting the site. And even beyond that, as new cohorts of superintendents come up through the ranks, I think we'll see a different type of user start to use the site as well."

Conclusion

The IASA is setting the standard for what can be achieved in public education by providing every superintendent in the State of Illinois with a secure social media tool to collaborate, work, and practice. "It's a professional learning community. We can learn from each other to solve problems and, in our case, our goal is to increase the effectiveness of public education in Illinois through increasing student achievement in public schools. Whatever we can do to enhance that collaboratively and cooperatively, we should be doing. Social Workplace is a great tool, and I look for great things to occur," concludes Voltz.

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