able by end users in a way that could violate policies for protecting sensitive data at financial firms, Gaetano says. That automatically limited the potential user pool for the tool, undermining the purpose of social networking software: connecting as many people as possible.

Plus, he says, Lotus Connections wasn’t easy to learn, resulting in slow uptake by employees. “We struggled to get people to adopt those tools.”

Nationwide then tried Yammer’s corporate social networking package, which includes chat, status updates, personal profiles and other features familiar to users of Facebook. Yammer offers more integration points to traditional enterprise applications than does Lotus Connections, and the simple-to-use tool took off quickly among insurance agents and corporate employees, says Chris Plescia, leader of marketing and collaboration technologies at Nationwide.

Companies eager to improve productivity by connecting employees to each other and to corporate information sometimes come on too strong, says Diane Piktilias, a program leader at research firm The Conference Board. Forced sociability rarely works.

Don’t expect to immediately see thousands of people catapulting to unseen productivity levels while they get to know each other’s professional skills and interests on internal social networks. “You cannot mandate the use of these tools. It goes against the concept,” Piktilias says.

Instead, IT and business leaders should train staff well. Don’t assume that all employees know how to use social media or can pick it up with no training, Piktilias says, especially workers beyond their twenties, for whom social networking may be new. Send trainers who are similar in age and work style to teach them how to use the tools, she advises.

Involvement by a high-profile manager can also help. Not only is enthusiasm infectious, but so is demonstrating how people benefit from being in on new conversations and streams of information, she says.

Nationwide President Mark Pizzi was one of Yammer’s first users. He quickly got thousands of followers—about 7,600—from around the country, Gaetano says. And soon, agents started to ask associates and each other questions to quickly find answers for customers.

About 15,000 people now use Yammer at Nationwide. Having so many employees able to talk to one another easily and contribute to conversations knowledgeably “drives an environment of continuous learning and sharing,” Plescia says. “There’s a sense of belonging to something greater.”

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