The Grill: Aon's CIO embraces social media tools to connect 65,000 employees
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Computerworld - As global CIO at Aon PLC, Steve Betts has taken on some big IT initiatives. His team helped develop and deploy the company's Global Risk Insight Platform, which is used to mine data from nearly $100 billion in insurance premiums. IT also helped develop Aon's health exchange offerings, which allow clients' employees to choose their healthcare plans. Betts also led the integration of IT operations following Aon's $4.9 billion acquisition of human resources consultancy Hewitt Associates. Here, Betts shares insights he has gained during his three years in the global CIO role at London-based Aon, a global risk management, insurance and reinsurance brokerage and provider of HR services.

Dossier

What's on your reading list? The Phoenix Project: A Novel about IT, DevOps, and Helping Your Business Win, by Gene Kim, Kevin Behr and George Spafford

If you retired tomorrow, what would you do? "Travel. There are loads of places I'd love to go."

What's your favorite place so far? "India. I love the culture."

Hometown: Bingham, near Nottingham, England

Two things most people don't know about you: "I can kick a soccer ball 100 times without it hitting the floor. And I had surrealist artwork exhibited in the Tate Modern gallery in Liverpool."

You've said "the world is drowning in data" and "making sense of it is the real challenge." What role does your IT operation play in that?
Making actionable, value-creating insight is really what the challenge is, and IT plays a big part in it. It's really about creating the right environment and putting the right parties together to get to that value-creating insight. So it's a partnership with my business colleagues and with the analytics specialists. We've established the Aon Center for Innovation and Analytics in Dublin, where we have a focused team of data analytics experts. They partner with folks from my team both in terms of gathering data and sensitizing it in a set of tools and an external-facing dashboard that our clients and the insurance carriers leverage.

You've also talked about the power of enterprise social media tools. What's your social media strategy?
It's been a big focus for us, working with the chief HR officer around the whole talent and knowledge agenda. We established a number of capabilities, [such as] a people-finder application -- think of it as an internal LinkedIn that helps our employees find others with the right skills. Finding the right person across 65,000 employees is critical. We have instant messaging and point-to-point videoconferencing, and we're in the process of rolling out Yammer, which [supports] real-time collaboration and dialogue around opportunities, innovation and so forth.

How do social media capabilities help your organization?
It connects colleagues around go-to-market or other areas where we're trying to establish capabilities or innovate. In the past, we've had the same set of activities going on in different regions, different countries, and the challenge has been to connect the best thinking so we don't re-create the wheel. This set of tools has been able to do that. If you have a client issue or you're trying to deliver a product, you can search it or create a discussion thread and you can now get to colleagues across the globe who have that shared goal. What we're seeing is there's much more teaming. It's changing the flow from up the chain to letting the web of colleagues connect. It's a much more agile way of connecting colleagues.

What is IT's role in fostering connections?
We've done a couple of things. We actually created a group that does report through HR specifically around this talent-knowledge-collaboration agenda. We work in very close contact with them to have some focus around that.

In terms of our approach to this and how I've positioned my team to help, we've taken a two-pronged approach: a top-down structure and a little "let it grow organically." So how I've applied that is my chief architect has established a set of communities around the big innovation areas -- mobility, cloud, analytics -- and we're driving a little more of a formal structure around getting the right folks plugged into those groups. At the same time, as I'm talking about Yammer, I'm on it all the time and I'm encouraging that grass-roots dialogue. You've got to have a little bit of both. If you try to drive it top-down, you kill the spontaneity and engagement around it. But if you have a just-in-the-wild type of exercise, you'll have trouble getting the value out of it that you need.

What was the biggest challenge you faced when you moved up to the global CIO position? I took that role in the fall of 2010, which coincided with the acquisition of Hewitt Associates. That was a $4.9 billion acquisition, the biggest in our history. The first challenge was to integrate seamlessly and bring together two pretty much equally sized, significant IT organizations, to bring more of that cohesion to the global capabilities. I had led the Aon-Benfield integration, so I had some experience, but the scale of the Hewitt acquisition was significantly greater. And I really needed to learn the HR consulting domain to be a really good partner to this business. It's been a good learning experience for me over the past few years, but that was a challenge.

What was the biggest goal for yourself or your IT organization in this new position? Have you achieved it yet? I don't know if you ever really achieve it. We've made some significant progress toward the goal, and that goal is to really be a key element in how Aon goes to market. The goal is to be technology-driven, to be a partner at the table, to bring innovations and capabilities and technologies that influence our go-to-market strategy. There are technology elements that our business folks don't know about, and it's my job to bring those to the table and influence how we go to market. I feel that's where I have a lot more to do. I don't think we've achieved yet the level of impact I think we can get to.