Social Connection from Any?where

By: Una Mc Grath, Design Strategist, FCAT | December 2021

Social distancing due to Covid19 has made us think more about social connection—where, how, and why we connect—in our lives and in our work. As organisations adopt hybrid working, building business resilience for future climate or health crises, how do we best design for social connection in this hybrid, phygital (physical/digital) world? And why does social connection matter so much?

We need to talk about social…

How many people did you talk to today? (Extent of social activity)

Did it make you feel better or worse, closer or more distant with someone? (Quality of interaction)

Was it transactional or non-transactional? (Nature of the interaction).

Did it expand or confirm your worldview? (Diversity of your social network)

Did it enhance bonding/ relationship/ belonging? (Primal need)

Why tech is not enough?

There has been a rush to tech as a solution panacea for social connection, with calls for the virtual equivalent of the watercooler and accidental collisions in virtual corridors, and a promise of immersive social experiences in VR/XR. But despite all the rapid new developments and start-ups in this space (see Figure 1 & 2 below), nothing so far has significantly improved our virtual quality of life nor our ability to socially engage virtually:
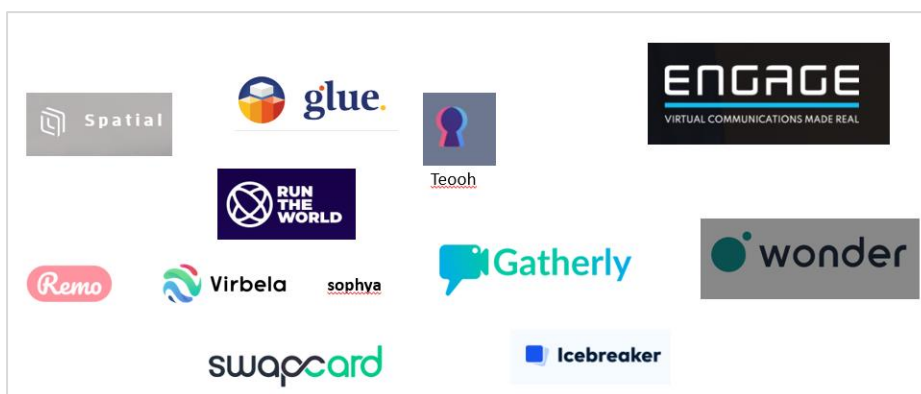

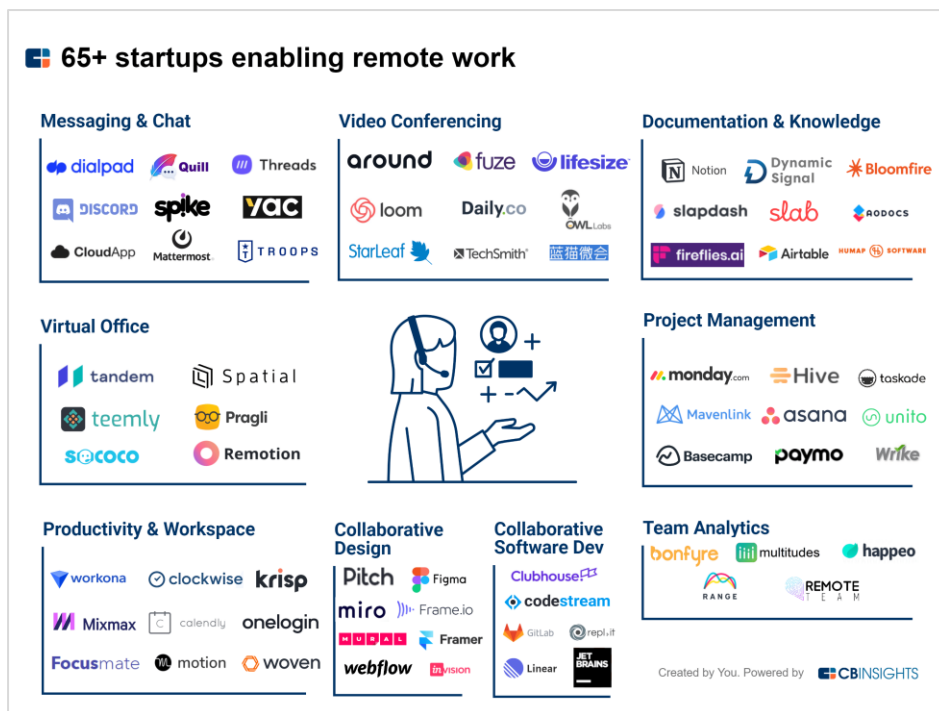*Figure 1: Social & VR/ Event Platforms*

Figure 2: 65+ Start-ups Enabling Remote Work (CB Insights 2020)

> *'The problem to solve is really hard. You can transfer content rather easily. (an audio track, some video...) but you can't replicate the social immersive experience on your smartphone or laptop'* (Board of Innovation 2020).

No doubt, the tech will evolve, the tools and equipment will become more seamless (VR headset anyone?) but what really matters is understanding the human & social factors involved in connecting socially with others, for example: the provision of opportunities and prompts to connect in the first place, the psychological safety, the 'climate' or feeling in the room, the sense of agency and optionality in the engagement ('can I enter/leave this conversation'?), the resonance we feel with others, the feedback reward from connecting socially.

These factors will play out whether it's in a real space or a virtual one and form the conditions for either engagement -or disengagement.

Why Social Connection matters to employers?

Social interaction is part of the employee experience

As humans, we are wired to connect. Whether we are introverts or extroverts, some level of social connection matters to us, for our overall mental and physical health, whether it happens in the workplace or our personal lives, and regardless of modality (face to face, online, via work, life, or play) - see Figure 3.
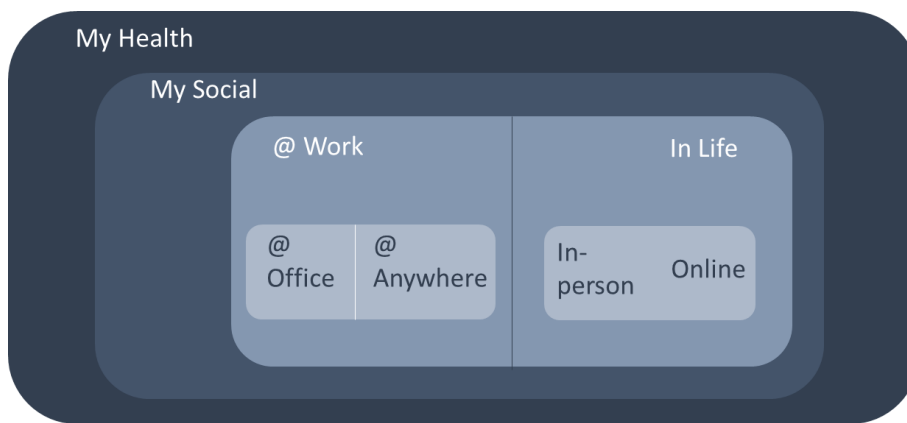
Figure 3. The Context of Social Connection

Mostly, we do not go to the office just to perform *functional* tasks. Much of our informal learning, our intangible value, gets accumulated and delivered, via our social interactions, planned or unplanned.

Our propensity for social connection in the workplace is deeply intertwined with organisational culture and employee experience. Great social interaction among employees helps to build and maintain culture. Likewise, the nature of the culture and employee experience can encourage, or discourage, employees to seek their social interactions at the office (Worktech™Academy/ Condeco 2021, p.4, 7).

Notably, a majority of U.S. employees are not seeking to return full-time to the office post-pandemic, though there are stark variations by sector and demographic (Pew Research Centre 2020).

Even pre-pandemic, the appetite for remote work was significant among knowledge workers. In its remote work report, Zapier suggests that as much as '95 percent of U.S. knowledge workers want to work remotely, and 74 percent would be willing to quit a job to do so' (Zapier 2019).

Employers will have to entice many employees back. This has put culture and employee experience firmly at the top of employers' agendas, the theory being that a great employee experience and a great culture will make one want to be there in the heart of it:

> *'As we look to the future, we see an opportunity to **reorient the office so that workers feel less anchored to it and more buoyed by it**, as facilities focus on hosting experiences that the isolation of the pandemic robbed from us all'* (Herman Miller 2021, p.3).

According to a 2021 survey of 500 US HR leaders – 92% of HR leaders interviewed said that employee experience is a top priority because of the remote work environment and the need to improve retention (isolved 2021, p.4). But to improve the employee cultural and social experience, leaders now need to think beyond the office channel. Just like retail has enabled multiple channels for a seamless customer experience and to drive loyalty- in-store point of sale, web platforms, mobile, click and collect, pop-up shops etc., we need to give the same kind of seamless, personalized experience to our employees as we do for our customers and view them as 'omni-channel' workers (Worktech™Academy/

Mirvac 2021, p.3). This will require more cross functional collaboration between HR, Tech and Facilities functions.

Social Connection is a health issue.

If we are not well, we cannot work. Poor social connection is bad for our health. It affects us not just mentally but physiologically and impacts other health risk factors:

> *'Social support and feeling connected can help people maintain a healthy body mass index, control blood sugars, improve cancer survival, decrease cardiovascular mortality, decrease depressive symptoms, mitigate posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, and improve overall mental health. The opposite of connection, social isolation, has a negative effect on health and can increase depressive symptoms as well as mortality'* (Martino, J. et al 2015).

This means that employers who have a health and wellbeing agenda, need to have concern also for employees overall *social* wellbeing, some of which, or all of which, may be fulfilled in the workplace - see Figure 3. Given that we spend most of our day at work, what happens for us during that time has a significant impact on our social capital, because many adults spend more waking hours at work than they do with their own families, and many US citizens have diminished social capital and engagement in their communities (Putnam, R. 2000).

Social Connection enables productivity, culture, and innovation

Having a best friend at work leads to better performance, especially for women, who are more than twice as likely to be engaged, according to repeated research by Gallup (Gallup 2018). It also improves job satisfaction (Teevan et. al / Microsoft 2021, p.9). A Boston Consulting Group (BCG) study of 12,000 employees working remotely or onsite in 2020, found that social connectivity is one of the various factors that can impact productivity. Employees who reported satisfaction with social connectivity with their colleagues are two to three times more likely to have maintained or improved their productivity on collaborative tasks than those who are dissatisfied with their connections (Boston Consulting Group (BCG) 2020).

Weak social ties with others matter as much as strong ones. According to Microsoft's New Future of Work Report, *'the ties that spark creative ideas and foster productive collaboration are built through interpersonal connection, informal communication, and spontaneous* interaction' (Teevan et. al / Microsoft 2021, p.9).

Two people with a weak tie, such as someone you might casually meet in the office corridor or at an event, are more likely to be in different social circles and locations, with different expertise, experience, and backgrounds. They therefore bring novel information and perspectives to the conversation, improving the opportunities for innovation. Microsoft reported that during the pandemic and remote work, stronger ties seemed to endure, and the weaker ties seemed to atrophy (Teevan et. al / Microsoft 2021, p.47).

Therefore, rebuilding these loose ties physically and/or virtually will matter for sustained innovation capability.

Herman Miller's research also noted this same loss of weak ties:

> *'While most of us have found virtual ways to maintain a sense of connection to our closest friends and family over the past year, our 'weak ties' were largely lost. This outer circle of acquaintances - whether that's the building concierge who is on a first-name basis with everyone, or the co-worker from another department with whom you like to make small talk - is vital to an individual's social health ... for establishing and maintaining culture, and helping people feel a sense of purpose and belonging'* (Herman Miller 2021, p.4).

Social Capital is getting built in new places

The 'where' of work has changed dramatically since the Covid 19 pandemic. Social capital is getting built and rebuilt in old and new places. We see the re-design of offices to be more social and collaborative, the relocation of offices to more regional locations with lower cost of living. Due to pervasive working from home, we see more local reinvigoration of communities near our homes and local neighbourhoods where we are increasingly working, spending time and money. And we see third spaces, such as proprietary and shared co-working hubs away from the home and office.

Two of Stanford's economists have observed a 'hollowing out' of city centres across the United States, in favour of suburbia reshaping real-estate and cities. (Leesman 2021)

4 million American workers quit in April 2020. According to a global survey by EY, more than 50% employees would consider leaving their job post Covid-19 if they were not afforded some form of flexibility in where and when they work (Worktech™Academy 2021).

In Europe, many asset management companies are responding to these employee preferences by providing varying degrees of flexibility in terms of working from home – see Figure 4.

Days allowed to work from home

Days	Companies
0 days	Goldman Sachs
2 days	Amundi, BlackRock, Jupiter, Vanguard
3 days	Abrdn, Axa, Invesco, M&G
5 days	Gam, Schroders*
Not specified	DWS, Fidelity, JPMorgan, UBS

Source: Ignites Europe. Based on information collected from asset managers.
* Staff still expected to go to office as and when required

Figure 4. Asset managers' hybrid work models compared (Ignites Europe 2021)

Some employers are sticking to the traditional model of 'work=office', whereby the social capital leaves the building at 5pm. JP Morgan CEO has said the office is better for 'young people' and those who want 'to hustle' (Reuters 2021). Others are maximising the social capital benefits getting built elsewhere, riffing off the co-working model.

Co-workspaces can increase a user's business network and social circle. Some large corporations have mimicked the idea hosting co-working type spaces in their buildings, for example Capital One 360 Cafes or deploy in local neighbourhoods (Waber B. et al 2014).

With so many downtown commercial sites becoming vacant post-pandemic, and new centres of work forming in regional areas, organisations may need to think outside the box and enable or curate social encounters in physical and virtual places other than the four walls of its own offices or consider redeployment of underutilized real-estate footprints.

Enablers of social connection in place of work.

Social Connection can be defined as 'feeling a part of something larger than yourself, feeling close to another person or group, feeling welcomed, and understood' (Hallowell EM. 1999, cited in Martino, J. et al. 2015). We can have formal and informal connections

at work. Areas where employers could potentially enable social connection for both formal and informal social interactions are proposed in figure 5:

WORKPLACE ENABLERS OF SOCIAL CONNECTION			
	INCREASING CONNECTIONS	**PROVIDING SUPPORT**	**MAKING IT FEEL GOOD**
FORMAL SOCIAL CONNECTIONS	Collaborative project opportunities. Social Learning together. Job shadow programmes. Mentoring. Intentional P2P pairing. Deploy measurements of social connectivity. Meetings that foster group dialogue/ group work/ new introductions. Realtime Data visualization of colleague availability/ projects/ professional interests (Opt-in) ERGs Corporate events. Corporate Social Platforms-Yammer, Teams,	Associate Experience Connectors. New hire buddy systems ERGs. Employee Assistance Programmes. Reward and Recognition rituals. D&I programmes & belonging indicators.	Company culture-positive, open, inclusive, transparent. Working team climate/ Psychological safety. Authentic leadership. Enabling whole self @ work.
INFORMAL SOCIAL CONNECTIONS	Physical and online social props and spaces for random collisions. Realtime Data visualization of colleague availability/ appetite for social/ areas of interest. (Opt-in) Intentional, non-transactional get-togethers that foster conversations/ introductions/ points of gravity. Social clubs. Hospitality. Provide grassroots social platforms and media. Persistent virtual place(s) to drop in with visible mood and theme. Intelligently ID meeting attendees and funnel them to a digital 'elevator' / corridor on way to the meeting for chitchat	Encouraging/reviewing the diversity of one's social network. Inclusive get togethers. Measure extent of workplace friendships.	Company culture-positive, open, inclusive, transparent. Group mood- openness, positivity, values difference Enabling whole self @ work. Enable space/ mood creation. Encouraging and modelling downtime & social at work. Grassroots affinity groups.

Figure 5: Workplace Enablers of Social Connection

It is worth noting that these enablers will apply whether the workplace context is in a physical location or virtual context online. No technology in and of itself will solve for these factors in the virtual office. Rather the enablers embedded in the extant organisational culture and employee experience will also be brought to the virtual employee experience. It is instead a matter of how well they are translated, curated, and made manifest online.

Who is designing the Virtual Real Estate?

So just as for the physical workplace, whereby the Real-Estate function deploys architects and designers to curate physical spaces and experiences, equally for the virtual spaces our employees will inhabit, we need to deploy content designers, neuroscientists, and user experience designers to curate online spaces and experiences appropriate to the very different medium.

Clearly from the extent of Zoom fatigue (Fosslien, L. et. al 2020, Microsoft 2020, Teevan et. al / Microsoft 2021 p.10), it is not simply a question of providing a piece of technology that solves the functional ability to connect and off you go! Not only must HR and Real Estate departments work closely with Technology to inform the experience and bridge between physical and virtual in a hybrid model (because in the new normal, people, place and technology need to be viewed holistically vs. in silos), but they must *also* import *relevant* new skills. Real Estate Departments will typically not have the expertise to design *online* spaces and experiences. Often, neither will the Technology department (unless it houses a high proportion of content and UX researchers and designers). Furthermore, design for the omni-channel 'work-from-anywhere' experience should not sit within technology either, but orchestrate between HR/ EE Experience, Facilities, Tech and C-suite.

> *'Experience now needs to transcend the office and be equal across all work channels whether an individual is at home, in the office, or working in a third space. The challenge is to shift the mindset from experience as a place, to experience as a moment in time'* (Worktech™Academy/ Condeco 2021, p.12).

Despite this need, most organisations remain focussed on re-designing the physical office for hybrid work, largely led by the Real-Estate function and their service providers. However, given that only half of employees may be working from the office at a given time, we need to design the experience for the other 50%.

The top three activities employees miss doing most in the office are: collaborating informally with other people, socializing with colleagues, and supporting the work of others (Worktech™Academy/ Condeco 2021, p.21). Clearly, either the current provision of online experience falls well-short of providing this, or some activities should always be face-to-face.

Virtual informal Social Connections- The Current State of Solutions

Outlined in Appendix 1 & Appendix 2, are a sample of the current technology and non-tech solutions or hacks, that aim to support informal social connections in a hybrid world. There is a burgeoning of new technology start-ups, that aim to solve for social connection. But despite the promise, they have yet to attain the same quality of in-person experiences.

We need both 'Presence' - that feeling of being in another place, and 'Agency'- the freedom to move around and control things as we do in physical reality. 'Agency is what keeps us leaning in. It's what gamers do when they control a character' (Fink, C. 2020)."

VR and XR probably hold the most long-term promise to achieve this.

But we also need to fully understand the more unspoken human 'job-to-be-done' and the unspoken protocols for social engagement and connection in any given context.

> *'The fundamental question that underpins these types of apps is: can you turn serendipity into an effective algorithm? Serendipitous encounters at work are enforced by a degree of choice and autonomy by individuals, they choose to get up and wander from their desk or they make a conscious effort to seek out conversation, whereas these digital connections are engineered by leadership or by an app. This method takes out the autonomy and authenticity from the process and, if not done correctly, it can feel that employees are being manipulated into bumping into each other'* (Worktech™Academy/ Condeco 2021, p.32).

The following human principles that might matter for accidental social collision were inferred from a series of snapshot low-fi workshops with the FCAT Europe team and FCAT design team:

- Must feel authentic
- Optional - no real commitment required to engage in a conversation
- Have a point of gravity/ reason to be there/ conversation props
- No pressure to run the conversation
- No awkwardness
- Must be easy – no barriers to entry
- Ability to know who else is free and up for it in real-time
- Situation /mood must be appropriate

Measuring Social Connections

Finally, an organisation or individual might like to get a handle on just how social they are as a whole/ versus their peers, or whether the social quotient has improved based on various interventions.

Boston Consulting Group developed a 'collision coefficient' in its New York office, a mathematical formula which measures chance encounters in physical space (GlobeNewswire 2017). One could imagine organisations developing a 'collision coefficient' for digital serendipity too (Worktech™Academy/ Condeco 2021, p.20).

Various measures have been developed in the academic literature for various types of workplace social relations – an 8-item social connectedness scale Lee and Robbins (1995),

12-item workplace friendship scale (Nielsen et al., 2000), a 4-item measure for support (Haynes et.al 1999), social support from peers in the workplace (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008) (all cited in Winslow et. al 2019), and a measure of informal workplace social interactions (Winslow et. al 2019).

Appendix 1: Technology Solutions – Social Connection

Solution	What it enables	Promise	Limitation
Virtual 3D Space E.g., Accenture's Virtual Office Nth Floor Glue, Spatial	Mixed reality experience that enables people to interact with each other in person, regardless of geographic separation using cartoon or photorealistic avatars of themselves	Can recreate an actual office space that is familiar. Can create entirely new spaces. Can create entirely new personas/avatars – playful. The space for meeting and gathering is unconstrained. Can represent person via full-bodied avatar with bodily mobility agency in space.	Requires use of VR /AR headset. Identity & context switching fatigue. Limited sensorial experience. Maintaining personal boundaries in virtual and physical space.

Solution	What it enables	Promise	Limitation
Realtime affinity matching to group conversations. E.g.Wonder- start-up video meeting app.	Enables a birds-eye view of a people in a large gathering to ID people or affinity groups clusters you can join serendipitously, or more intentionally via video	Good for event-based networking. Creates a point of gravity/ reason to spontaneously join a group via thematic topics. Provides an aerial view of the group/ context/ conversations.	The actual social interaction is still just a face on a tile, like in Zoom.
Plotting people onto digital floorplans or tables (Innovation Leader 2021) E.g. Remo, Rally, Gather	Gives mental model of a real or imagined space and your location in it. Can digitally 'walk over' and approach an individual or group. Can spin up a random video chat. Some enable sound-sensitivity to proximity.	Birdseye spatial view allows wider contextual understanding of who is with who and who is around. Could potentially integrate with true physical GPS location of people in actual physical office.	The actual social interaction is still just a face on a tile, like in Zoom. Lacks a compelling point of gravity. It doesn't have the true constraints of 'having' to walk somewhere like in physical building- must decide to go into this window. A local, at home, in-person social interaction may be more fulfilling – digital fatigue.

Solution	What it enables	Promise	Limitation
People Matching/ pairing for casual conversations/ coffee	Algorithm enables a match of two people with stated shared interest and sets up the meeting.	Can grow diversity of one's network. Can enable connections with people outside your building and team.	Apart from a shared interest, both parties enter blind to human cues, personality etc. May add to meeting overload.
Audio Apps (Basu, T. 2021) e.g., Clubhouse, Cappuccino	Clubhouse allows you drop in on a group conversation. Cappuccino enables voice memos.	Audio more intimate than text. Doesn't require camera on. Can tune in casually to group chatter. Allows asynchronous digestion of voice recording snippets – more personal than an email.	Open audio chats need moderation to prevent noise.
Virtual experience Design/Mood creation E.g., Ohyay, Projection technology	User can design own virtual spaces and invite friends in.	Can set the right mood and tone for informal conversations. Can curate virtual event spaces and rooms.	Not life-sized immersion in space. Chopped visual profiles.
Livestreams from real places e.g., Earthcam		User could potentially stream live feeds from real places (e.g., real café) as custom virtual rooms	Privacy issues. Unwanted ambient noise

Appendix 2: Non-tech Hacks – Social Connection

Solution	What it enables	Promise	Limitation
Create intentional social space at the top and tail of all meetings. Eg, meeting opens @11, starts at 11:05	Provides a space for the pre-/post meeting chatter that normally happens in the physical space as attendees gather/leave. For larger groups needs breakout rooms.	Sends message that work is not just transactional; team is about the people, not just the work they do.	Can easily peter out over time in favor of expediency unless an organizational behavior protocol is in place.
Create a dedicated social/community wall. Mirrored in office/online. Separate from workstation. = @office: large connected screen in community space in physical office + @anywhere: a dedicated monitor/ window for social, in remote location.	Creates a tangible embodiment of a dedicated space/zone to socialise with the wider employee community and to digest interesting community information.	The dedicated screen in ones home or at physical office can act as a *prompt* to socialise. Can use interesting data visualisation of interesting moments, movements, trends, and activities of people across the firm. Can display location avatars in realtime of people who have entered social zone and prompt a catch up.	
Create 'doing' socials online. e.g tinkering e.g social cycling online like Peleton's gamified biking. e.g. cooking	Doing something of interest in a shared space enables casual conversation whilst doing.	Creates no pressure to talk, the activity acts as a social prop. Can mix the physical and digital experience.	Depending on the activity, can be clunky to share it.

Solution	What it enables	Promise	Limitation
Create playbooks for informal social activities/ games	A non-transactional/ non-work related gathering

Allow people to unwind. | Teams/ leaders don't have to reinvent the wheel for each team social event. | Can be tiresome – not everyone wants organized fun.

Space must feel physchologically safe. |
| **Build an online Community**

E.g., Microsoft's refreshed yammer/ Viva 2021 | This bird's eye view of conversations across the business | Keeps you plugged in to what matters most to you and helps you see/ connect with the people involved.

It allows for many chance connections and serendipitous conversations over chat that might migrate to a meeting. | Where communities are corporate led vs grass-roots, its based more on top-down vs bottom up interests.

Mindshare/ information overload. |
| **Be Open by default** (Kelly,K. 2021) | Intead of teams working on outputs in isolation, make OPEN collaboration channels and document repositories a default. People across an organisation can discover content through search, newsfeeds, and notifi cations and then strike up discussion with content authors. | Expands knowledge diffusion as well as prompting social interaction with outer network of weak ties. | Needs a robust knowledge archiving, tagging and search system. |
| **Work out loud (WOL)** = Observable Work + Narrating Your Work (Working out loud 2021) | WOL = a habit of sharing and narrating your work in the digital workplace, incl. rough drafts, | Makes the work and the creator employee visible through sharing. | WOL requires behavioural change. |

Solution	What it enables	Promise	Limitation
	and seeking feedback.	Elicits feedback and conversations on the work. Expands knowledge diffusion and social network.	

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