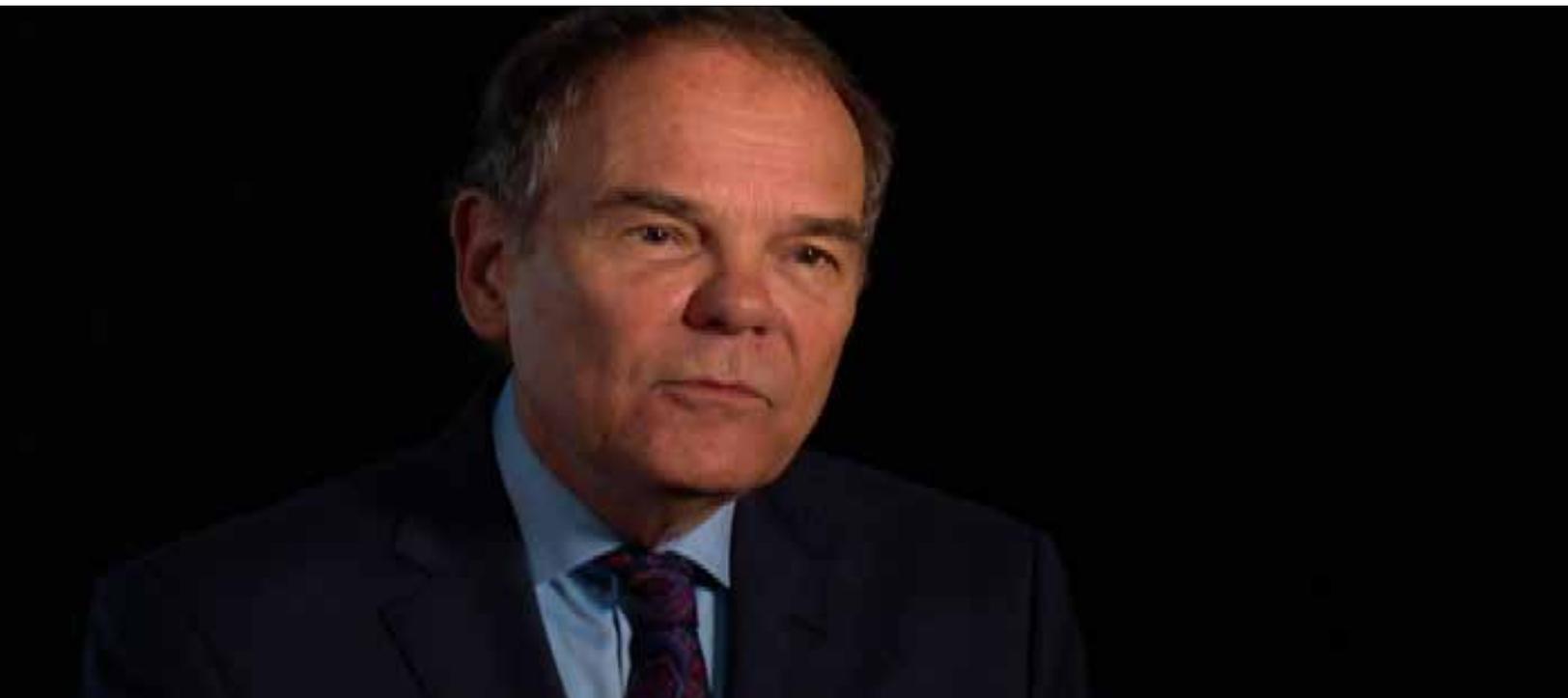JANUARY 2013

ORGANIZATION PRACTICE

Making internal collaboration work: An interview with Don Tapscott

The author and strategist describes why effective knowledge management within enterprises requires replacing e-mail with social media.

Don Tapscott, an adjunct professor at the University of Toronto, spoke with McKinsey's Rik Kirkland in September 2012. For more on Tapscott, see his new book (with Anthony D. Williams), *Radical Openness: Four Principles for Unthinkable Success* (TED Books, January 2013), and view his June 2012 TED Talk, "Four principles for the open world," on ted.com. The following is an edited transcript of the interview.

How do we get beyond e-mail to these new social platforms that include an industrial-strength social network? Not through Facebook, because that's not the right tool. But there are tools now: wikis, blogs, microblogging, ideation tools, jams, next-generation project management, what I call collaborative decision management. These are social tools for decision making. These are the new operating systems for the 21st-century enterprise in the sense that these are the platforms upon which talent—you can think of talent as the app—works, and performs, and creates capability.

But we've approached this wrong over the years. Take something like knowledge management. Knowledge management has failed. We had this view that knowledge is a finite asset, it's inside the boundaries of companies, and you manage it by containerizing it.

So, if we can get all of Jessica's knowledge into this container, or computer system, then when she leaves the company we'll still have Jessica, or we can get to Jessica in this container. And this was, of course, illusory, because knowledge is an infinite resource. The most important knowledge is not inside the boundaries of a company. You don't achieve it through containerization, you achieve it through collaboration.

So, there's a big change that's underway right now in rethinking knowledge management. It's really moving toward what I would call content collaboration, as opposed to trying to stick knowledge into a box where we can access it. E-mail is sort of like what Mark Twain said about the weather. Everybody's talking about it, and nobody's doing anything about it. We have to get rid of e-mail.

You need to have a new collaborative suite where, rather than receiving 50 e-mails about a project, you go there and you see what's new. All the documents that are pertinent to that project are available. You can create a new subgroup to talk about something. You can have a challenge or an ideation or a digital brainstorm to advance the interests of that project. You can cocreate a document on a wiki. You can microblog the results of this to other people in the corporation who need to be alerted.

A good example is IDEO, arguably the world's leading design company. They created a platform that got 96 percent adoption. And they did it right. They created a beautiful platform with an elegant user interface. And people just go there. This is one of those cases of: if you build it and you implement it properly, they will come. But you have to go about implementation in an appropriate way.

I've been working with a very large financial services company, and we went in there to develop a strategy for these collaborative tools. But we couldn't get any meetings with the executives to interview them. And finally, we got down to what the problem was: these executives were spending ten hours a day in meetings, and it turns out that 80 percent of these meetings were informational. So, there's your killer app for that company. They can free up 80 percent of their time by getting out of these informational meetings and onto a collaborative platform where you use the tools of our time to create a high-performance organization.

We're in the very early stages of these collaborative suites transforming the nature of work. And that's kind of understandable. Lots of companies have made attempts and have failed, because they didn't take the time to try and understand what makes a good diffusion strategy.

You need to start with a group of young people that will adopt the technology and start to use it naturally, because it's just like the air to them. You need to understand the application requirements. Typically, there's some customization that's involved. And you need to develop a strategy where senior management is clearly endorsing this, encouraging this, and using the technology themselves so that others will. These are big cultural changes. They're often received with coolness or worse, mockery and hostility.

And typically, vested interests fight against change. People that have an interest in the old ways of working, people that dominate face-to-face meetings and like that a lot, for example—they don't want to move toward some other kind of platform where it's more of a meritocracy, rather than a personality thing.

But having said that, the train has left the station. The horse is out of the barn. We're not going back on this. And I hope that a decade from now, electronic mail will be a vague memory in our minds and we'll be using these tools to collaborate much more effectively. ○