

[Innovation in Action]

What's Next? Your Future in Social Networking

When most people think of online “social networks,” they tend to think of Facebook, MySpace and YouTube. More and more, however, online social networking is pointing the way to new forms of communication and new ways of doing business. In an interview for *Maclean's* readers, Chuck Hamilton, New Media and Learning Leader for IBM's 3D Internet Division, explores the new frontier of virtual networking.



◀ Chuck Hamilton,
New Media and
Learning Leader
for IBM's 3D
Internet Division



“ Social networks are emerging as key tools for business innovation.”

Q Help us understand what social networking is all about.

A People in every industry are aggregating in virtual forums, all around the world. These networks are emerging as key tools for business innovation. Social networks allow businesses to collaborate with all kinds of people, with diverse backgrounds and different levels of expertise, from locations all over the world.

Q How are businesses taking advantage of social networks today?

A Companies are using social networking today to connect with affinity groups. If you're in insurance, for example, you want to know what your customers are worried about. What do they need in the way of insurance services? Today you can reach out to that community and discuss those issues.

Other companies are taking their designs and putting them on the Web for people to explore. They are

using these global collaboration tools for product design and software development.

Q What opportunities do virtual worlds bring?

A Virtual worlds really are an example of a whole new space evolving. Millions of online users, visually representing themselves as “avatars,” going to a new space, online, to meet and interact. And real business is taking place.

Virtual spaces enable us to deal with things we couldn't before. For example, you can build things that you would not normally be able to produce, such as a complete oil rig that your avatars can actually walk through. You can build a model and simulate the entire experience of being there. Up till now we've not been able to put 2,000 virtual people in one visualized virtual space at one time and try something out. This is going to be a hot topic for businesses for the next few years.

Virtual worlds are quickly becoming a powerful tool and a driving force to what many are calling the 3D Internet – one that is open, immersive, innovative, and social. We believe it will enable new or transformed applications for business and society, many of which we can't even imagine yet.

Q Are there business benefits to using social networks?

A Virtual social technologies reduce the cost of doing business. You can pull together an innovation very, very quickly by leveraging thoughts and expertise from around the world.

For instance, a large hotel chain has built its own hotels in Second Life to test-market a new brand. They're modifying their hotel designs based on suggestions from

their users and how they react to these virtual models.

Q It sounds like science fiction...

A But it's happening all around us. Many Canadians are now spending time in virtual space using networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and MySpace. There are big virtual “game” worlds such as World of Warcraft, or Club Penguin for children, a great Canadian example that was recently sold to Disney. These concepts are very common in the youth market, so I think people in the future are going to be very familiar with these kinds of virtual worlds.

And IBM is helping companies attract and screen potential new employees through virtual world interactions. We're working with national retailers to simulate new store designs that will transform the shopping experience. We can show their consumers how new products will look in their home by creating virtual kitchens and simulated home theatres.

Canada has been the leader in virtual thinking for a long time. We were one of the first countries to put together Internet banking systems, and we will be one of the leading countries to use virtual collaboration, if only because of our dispersed geography.

To view the interview, please visit www.macleans.ca/ibm

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