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GM's Tony Scott Discusses New Employee Portal Initiative

Workscope, a software vendor, recently interviewed Tony Scott, chief technology officer for General Motors. GM is using Workscope for the company's employee portal, Employee.com. Here are some excerpts from that interview.

Q. What was GM's RFP process?

A. Once we decided we needed to outsource our employee portal, we put an RFP on the street. We got several bids from all the usual vendors that provide GM with technology, including all the big ERP and systems integration firms.

The bids were all very high. We had outlined a general set of portal requirements that almost any large corporation would want, so we began to scratch our heads and say, "Why should GM pay for a unique installation of this when some vendor ought to be offering it as a service to multiple companies?"

Then, we saw the Workscope proposal. And in that package we saw the ability to integrate a lot of what we had, and not have to change to the way some vendor thought we should operate.

We really liked the notion Workscope has in terms of what they call life event processing. What drives employees nuts here at GM is that the company has a form for everything. If we'd gone the approach of just webifying the paper forms and processes that we have today, it would have further annoyed our employees. So we got very excited about the notion that if an employee moves and changes his address, he just enters that information once. The correction flows to all the files that carry his home address so that everyone who looks at his files immediately has his current address. It only takes one change.

Q. What's the value proposition in this new platform for managing all of your HR, supplier relationships and portal assets

for the employee?

A. Our vision for the GM implementation of Employee.com is that it will provide everything an employee needs to do his job, but also enable him to enjoy the weekend.

A lot of employee portals start with a notion for a static website where one size fits all. Where we want to go with this is, one size fits me. I will have my version of the portal and my office mate next door will probably have something very different. We are attempting to create something that is personally relevant to each employee. That will be the value proposition, and the key differentiator.

Q. What's the real advantage for a large company to go with Employee.com over building a portal just the way they might want it for their employees?

A. If I am the VP of human resources or the CIO in some large company and I'm faced with a choice-on one hand I can go out hire somebody to build a one-off solution just for us. In that case, I'm going to sit around in a room with a bunch of IT people and we're going to figure out what we want to do, how we are going to do it, who we should get to build it, etc. That's one alternative. Or, the next day, a Workscape salesperson walks through the door and says, "Here it is, guys. We've figured out how to do it. We've put all the pieces together. We can deliver a solution in a very short period of time, and dozens of other companies have already signed up for it, and proven it works. All you've got to do is sign here. You don't have to buy the hardware. You don't have to hire the programmers. Workscape has done all the homework and can present a very useful, yet customized solution for your company that makes a lot of sense."

That was a pretty attractive proposition, in my book.

Q. What role did the United Auto Workers (UAW) union play in the decision?

A. UAW's involvement was sparked by Ford's announcement that they were going to give free PCs to every employee. Whatever happens in the auto industry creates "haves" and "have nots." From a union perspective, that put GM in a position of being the "have nots." So, the initial dialogue was, "What are you guys going to do in response?"

As soon as the question was asked, we went out and surveyed our employees. We found that 75 percent of our employees already had PCs and that doing a simple PC offering wouldn't be that highly valued. On the other hand, content and connectivity were regarded as important.

At that point, we looked at ISPs-who the biggest players were and who had the broadest capabilities. AOL just popped right to the

top of the list. The AOL TV device, we think, will help our employees get connected. It's easy to use. All you need is a telephone and a TV set-and about 99.9 percent of our population have both. So we think offering an AOL connection will be a pretty effective way of getting at that last 25 percent that have not gotten up and running on the Internet yet.

Another factor in our decision was what Workscope presented to us regarding privacy and security. Some of the proposals we looked at involved push advertising. Companies kept stressing that advertising on the portal would improve our economics. Our employees said they really didn't want to be bombarded by tons of advertising and all the rest of it.

Q. How will Employee.com help employees with their work-life balance?

A. In almost everyone's job, the blur between work and home is getting blurrier. It's as if the job is 24x7. You're not at work 24x7, but you need to monitor things that have to do with your work environment around the clock. Plus, in the case of GM employees, our social activities revolve heavily around friends we make at work. As our whole society becomes more online oriented, ignoring this or hoping it will go away is behind us. It's like trying to exist without a phone or television. Having access to the Internet is becoming a necessary ingredient of our life. So, things like calendar integration between home and work are becoming important; so is e-mail connectivity.

Before we put this technology in place, I would have to stay at work to do things I now do at home. Now, I have the flexibility to say, "I'm going to go home, have dinner, put the kids to bed, and then I'll work on that." Sure, there's a trade-off, but it's ultimately about flexibility and personal choice and personal productivity.

Q. Will GM's employee marketplace transform the company's business in any way?

A. I think that when you look back 20 years from now, GM and other companies, in and out of the automobile industry, which have been bold enough to help their employees change their attitudes about the Internet and how it's remaking the world, will emerge as leaders.

GM used to be the classic model of a self-integrated corporation. GM owned everything it did. Every part we put in a vehicle was manufactured by a GM company someplace. In recent years, we've flipped the switch and gone the other way.

The classical definition of who an employee is and what role they play in the company is changing. We need a combination of long-term employees and outside consultants. Our new portal is just one way that we're trying to get smarter about how we get the right

information to people when and how they want it. At the same time, we're giving them lots of added value through entertainment options, an online calendar, products they can buy at discounted prices, etc.

Q. How is GM going to get people to use Employee.com?

A. We are already promoting the concept internally. When it's all ready to go, we'll do a great deal of training. But I think the real motivation for people will be that it will be the best source for so many things that are important to them, from information on company affairs or company benefits to entertainment or productivity applications.

Q. Will employees be able to access the online portal with wireless devices?

A. Yes, definitely. The architecture is designed in such a way that employees will be able to access Employee.com from any of those mediums or technologies. Wireless is exploding, so the site can't be tethered to a PC. The content and solution need to be appropriate for all of and any of those access methods.

Again, mobile connectivity was one of the reasons for choosing Workscape and AOL. We thought that their respective strategies were right on the money in terms of the design for employee access.

Q. Why was human resources the place where the idea for a portal all started?

A. One thing we wanted to accomplish was to create a portal that would serve as an electronic window into the world of our company, its culture, behaviors, etc. An important aspect of that is that we give employees the chance to take advantage of GM's size and buying power.

In its simplest form, the marketplace will be a way for people to get a reduced price on GM goods and services. We already offer employees discounts on some products, but they cannot get these products all in one place. With Employee.com, if I want to buy a GM hat or a T-shirt or an insurance policy or order DirecTV, I will go to our online marketplace. What's more, I will be able to do that cost effectively, in terms of my time, literally from my chair.

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