

A 7” heel on the treadmill! Post-Slack Offices arriving?

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Pumps or Peep-toes; Messenger rooms or Chat-tools; no matter what they look like, they are definitely making flats look oh-so-passe. But should big floors be bothered?

Pratima H

INDIA: No matter how ‘in’ it is out there, or if it’s the exact shade of your tangerine or makes a stylish sound or is even incredibly easy to slip in and out of – a cool pair of heels has to be tucked inside locker-rooms and left where they belong.

For such glitzy creatures definitely do not belong on a weather-beaten, sweat-bathed surface.

Or so we thought.

And the guy who is staring at 'the' wall with not just knitted but knotty eyebrows.

He expected another 'fitting' face to fill the blank frame and join the family-tree with that long-running poise and grace. The row of portraits – from the face with an intimidating-gaze to the stern nose or even a soft smirk – had decorated the hall intensely and hence, ably so far.

Barring beards that were gradually disappearing or moustaches that were shrinking with every next face, all had been quiet and serene on this wall.

The oak-panelled faces had moved towards the future with elegance and dignity – the heavy files fed well on paper had made space for Post-it collages with the same display of etiquette that was offered to the ensuing faces henceforth – landline phones, EPABX, Fax, email, to video conferencing, online meetings or a legacy suite until the next carefully-sketched, serene alternative swooped in.

The IT tree had grown in a predictable and symmetrical manner. Wasn't the waltz to continue?

But the saxophone has been ripped out. Suddenly, a 'bang' has erupted. An almost-alien looking face has claimed tenancy on this very wall. His right to the throne and absence of family DNA is only weakened by the beads (and at all the wrong places at that) pierced on him, the shockingly-colorful dye screaming from his hair and the swagger he flashes.

This could not be it.

Why would people actually resort to chatting on an app – and not for fun, of all surprises, but for work! Whatever happened to conference rooms, serpentine emails, project management suites and their cousins?

Who are these chat-dudes and what makes their UI so cool, their integrations so cozy, their pricing so magnetic, their speed so worship-worthy and their features so playful that an employee finds no white fence between wass-up-ing with buddies and backslapping colleagues in an app?

Understandably, now, the scratching of one's forehead commences.

Miranda Priestly is worried

Walls or treadmills, at palaces and offices, now they are supposed to be jaded or familiar, depending on how you spell them. That's how it has been and has to be if work and lineage has to go on.

A heel just shakes up the very beam of stability – makes it almost impossible to do what bosses love to do often – to put a finger at something, to get a grip, to continue linearity.

Whether it is the museum or the well-worn elevator, an occasional smiling face or a suave moccasin is tolerable but weird-looking teenagers and stilettos – now that is a good enough reason for a tourette. Or two.

It is not merely confusing, but out of turn and possibly plain annoying. And yet, someone around you is asking you to sign up for that cool chat app at work, isn't it?

There has to be more to it than a Whatsapp contagion making its way inside workplaces or millennials wheeling in their chatter-ways past the office gates. Why does the average co-worker want to send you a shout-out over a chat window instead of shouting out from the cubicle the way it happened just a few months back? Where on earth have those endless emails evaporated? What form of oxidation would the expensive HR software rust into?

Could it be remotely possible that there was a huge blank that existed with methods that worked 'just ok' until last year? What if email was exhausting, suites cumbersome, video meetings icky and walking up to the cubicle the new adventure sport?

Where was the gap that made it easy for cool chat messaging tools to take over?

Yes, why has there been a lot of excitement around messaging apps when email systems with tight integration, combined with Calendar, Tasks, and Contacts exist? Ranjan Tayal, SVP & SBU Head – HCM Solution, Ramco

Systems candidly asks and answers. “The answer perhaps lies in similar dynamics of mobile app stores when they opened up the platform. The stores gave developers an opportunity to get creative and most importantly overcome the market access constraint.”

The result as he ventures: A few million apps. While not all of these would be useful, but, the combined creativity has gone far ahead compared to limited apps that phone companies could think of or, come up themselves in spite of some reasonably large and capable teams.

Ok, so apps were the nudge this torrent needed but were they good enough to push out emails? Or was there something else also playing a partner-in-crime?

What if we look at the enterprise as a workspace that is headed towards a modern, more updated culture and where people want to stay connected on-the-go and be notified in order to not miss a thing?

That’s how Ninad Raval, Director Product and Design, Flock pictures it anyways.

He contends that while the culture is evolving and businesses are becoming more agile, it is important to address all their communication and collaboration needs simultaneously. “Traditional mediums of communication tend to slip through cracks and are not the ideal solution for time sensitive issues. Emails, telecons and meetings consume valuable, productive time, thereby leading to leading in greater turnaround time. Hence, business messaging apps like Flock, Slack or Hipchat provide the perfect solution to this quandary.”

He argues that these apps are equipped with some powerful features, enabling synchronous communication. “For example, Flock allows you to create groups in order to discuss and resolve issues, as and when they arise. Moreover, video calls enable face to face conversations and members can connect from anywhere, with multiple devices.”

In the words of Pat Sullivan, CEO of [Ryver](#), a new category of software has started as chat tools of today uncover a great problem that was lurking unnoticed so far. “Email, let’s face it, had got so challenging and unwieldy to use that it was making office communication difficult. Email was never designed to be a collaboration tool. When it comes to collaboration it’s about speed between partners, vendors, team members, marketing guys – everyone. So what Ryver and other players have done is pulled the workers out of endless email pits and enabled them with the one thing that makes the difference between fast and slow decisions- speed.”



Email has become quite challenging and unwieldy: Pat Sullivan, Ryver

With nimble features like to-dos, reminders and video conferences, these solutions also enhance efficiency and productivity, Raval digs in.

Moreover, as he informs that these tools are well equipped with search and archive capabilities that enable unlimited search history for individual and group chats. Documents no longer need to be attached with emails and can be instantly sent with a simple ‘Drag and Drop’ option.

Maybe the growing inclination has also got to do something with the fact that people were already using messaging apps in their personal lives, thus accepting them in business context seemed viable.

In fact, Raval goes on to state that tools such as Slack, Hipchat and Flock compete on the edge. “Hassle free communication, document sharing, archival and search capabilities, external app integrations etc. are an indispensable part of any business communication app. Flock, for example, has a clean UI that makes it extremely simple for a new user to understand and get adept at. Also, Flock is synced across devices that enable users to pick up conversations, right where they left them, anywhere.”

Still, Tayal still doesn't see emails finally losing the race to team messaging. While emails will continue to serve the more across teams, organization space, team messaging on the other hand is likely to dominate within team communication. "So in some ways the annoying spam mails get taken care of. The automation with other team tools comes in handy as well. That said, the short message form factor will favour high velocity communication requirements, while emails for more thought out formatted stuff." He debunks.

But there is more than email that an app goes after friends. Rahul Asave, Principal Product Manager, Atlassian brings in another collateral damage to the debate: Unified Communication.

He argues that there was nothing 'unified' about unified communications. Citing Atlassian's very own rival to Slack, [HipChat](#), he claims that this tool brings communication on a single platform with visibility and action-ability over various data, applications to teams with context and pace to information that helps team collaboration in the real world and drives productivity in the practical sense.



Redundancy of training is an attraction with such tools: Nilesh Sangoi, CTO, Meru Cabs
For Nilesh Sangoi, Chief Technology Officer of Meru Cabs Pvt. Ltd., a strong attraction point here is that of redundancy of training. "With enterprise software, there is often need for lot of training and interface issues. People are also moving away from desktops and towards devices so the factor of features becomes important as well."



Without second thought, business messaging platforms will evolve to reach enterprise scale:

Ninad Raval, Flock

Now that's where one almost itches to point at the elephants in the room. What about enterprises? Would they be able to dance with chat-heels?

Heels or Ankle Sprain?

An office work scenario is not like fixing a coffee-hang-out with some friends. There are set protocols, hierarchies, methods, nuances, documentation, compliance needs and of course, the need to keep a lot under wraps.

The question then becomes much more significant than 'maintaining the FYEO' footnote. Its perimeter has to make room for security, appropriateness, relevance, archival and versioning of discussions that blossom on a chat window.

Not to forget, the risks of these tools turning into another Rogue IT phenomenon for CIOs and CEOs.

The ease of getting started in a DIY mode also has a down side of management, with each new member joining or leaving. While this has been considered insignificant in small teams, it can become a challenge for larger enterprises, as Tayal already cautions.

Surendra Singh, Country Director, Forcepoint seconds the risk-ready posture, as he outlines how collaboration tools are gaining fast acceptance which requires multiple people working simultaneously on a project. "It is important to know how collaboration tools are being used. Are these tools being used by employees themselves as freeware or introduced by corporate IT? Collaboration tools involve working on a common project(s), sharing of critical information and storing of data somewhere in the cloud."



We have lots of enterprise customers across many verticals:

Rahul Asave, Atlassian

What is then making Enterprise customers like NASA, American Express, Marriott etc comfortable using HipChat?

Asave unbosoms many possible factors: The HipChat Server – that provides HipChat behind the firewall; Admin controls that allow turning features on/off; Add-on controls to control data flow and strong control on Guest and external users.

“To add to that, we bring in SaaS, behind-the-firewalls comfort too as well as control for admins to enable the turn-on/off scenarios as per legal and regulatory needs. We have lots of enterprise customers ranging across hospitality, research, science, financial verticals.”

He also presents native apps like to-dos, reminders and opinion polls as other differentiating factors of these tools when compared to archaic mediums of communication. “Therefore, it is only a matter of time before modern age collaborative platforms become a ‘one stop shop’ for all business communication needs.”

For Sullivan, integrations with DropBox or Google Drive, SharePoint etc. ease the areas of document management and control and security-wise, everything is encrypted. “Users are specifically invited by members of a team and that controls access strongly.” He doesn’t see any major red flags on those aspects with the chat revolution.

And as far as Shadow IT is concerned, Raval quips that before introduction of business messaging applications, there were lots of apps operating in the shadow. “It’s time that we realize some fundamental truth regarding the way

we work. We are agile and mobile, it means that on a daily basis, we are using multiple apps to communicate and collaborate with our internal colleagues and external vendors. Mobile is no longer a secondary mode of communication, thus we need a mobile-first strategy that ensures new applications support.”

Raval doesn't for a moment, doubt the capability of messaging apps to turn into an enterprise phenomenon and here's why. One major concern of the IT team is maintaining data privacy. Team communication platforms provide a solution to this quandary, he asserts.

Players like HipChat, Flock are also providing both cloud and on-premise options. Raval bolsters this factor – Business collaboration apps also provide BCP (Business continuity process). Compatibility with in-house systems is very crucial. Many of these platforms communicate well with existing software and apps. Audit trail capabilities and granular file sharing ensures increased user control.”

Now that can be reasonable but how much or soon to challenge the territory that an Office 365 or Skype or an HR tool occupied? “It is less of an enterprise messaging alternative, where Skype for business with its tight integration with Outlook and Office 365 has an edge, but the adhoc nature and no IT approach to get started favours [Slack](#).” Tayal goes on with a sharp lens.



Short message form factor will favour high velocity comm needs:

Ranjan Tayal, Ramco Systems

While Slack seems to have an edge, are the 800 pound gorillas far behind- he presses on. “Slack took the lead but enterprise alternatives like Skype for Business from Microsoft are catching up fast. Besides text messaging, built-in embedded browser windows within chat to display buttons, cards and other

simple actions are going to make up for that occasional repetitive typing and keep alive the visual aspects. Moreover, Skype for business powered by Office 365 has a significant lead in terms of existing users; around 400 million compared to 10 million of Slack.”

As Tayal rightly points out, the competitive aspects are already showing with Microsoft getting very aggressive with their Bot Framework. Same goes for Facebook with wit.ai, which at this time is more of the NLP tool set, but, architecturally more open compared to other offerings. Let’s not forget the ChatBot mania that’s ahead. The team tools integration is where the recent enthusiasm has been and the talk of intelligent agents, all the way to ChatBots is what’s coming.” He portends.

And with that, the narrative swings to another and perhaps, a higher set of heels about to ascend office treadmills next – the Chatbots

Post-Slack Offices: Part 2

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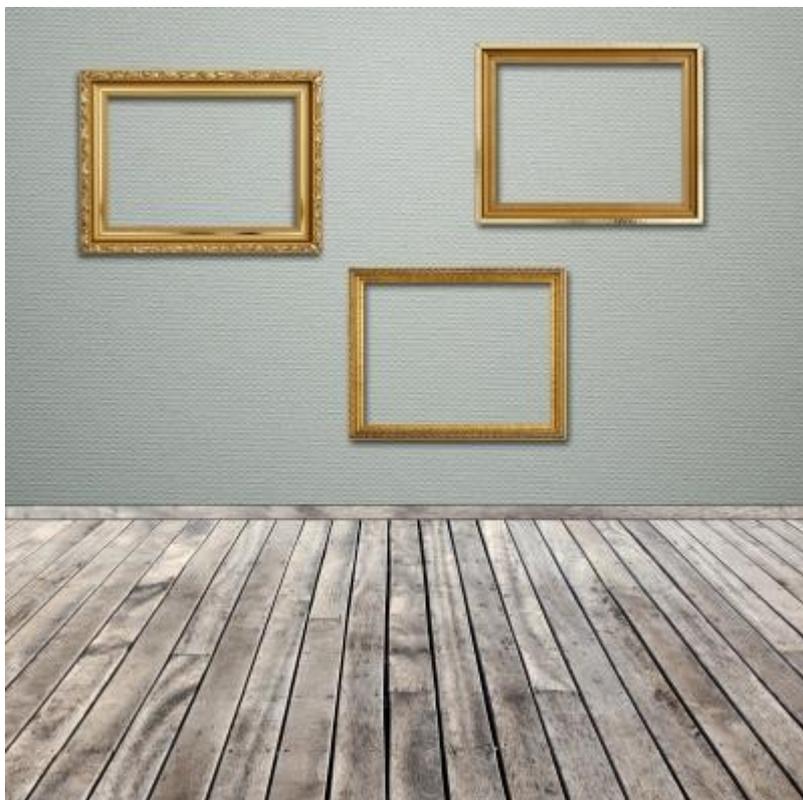


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Are Bots the next big thing for getting work done together?

Pratima H

INDIA: In the [first part](#), we tried to get over the shock of finding chat-boxes crawling out of their closets like a proud Toby and perching themselves well around guys that wave wands of action at workplace.

Now, may be, is the time for squealing one more exclamation as we find the elf wearing that 'Toby Has No Master' look in full form.

There's something/someone afoot that explains why even Slack has been investing millions of dollars and future-workplace paradigms on new AI/ML/NLP creatures. Make no mistake – The likes of Cisco (check out Cisco Spark partnerships), Microsoft (Skype is a small example of what's brewing

inside its research cauldrons), and of course, Facebook (via Messenger) are in the fray as well.

Bots are flying into the chat realm. And fast.

Chat-Bots for better Hamstrings?

If the apps apocalypse took time for bosses to wake up to, then there is another siren gathering decibels soon in the form of **Bots**.

They are here – almost. With them, there are new discussions spewing around pull bots vs. push bots, bots' help on cutting down chat-noise and a new face of efficiency along with speed.

One may fairly expect the rise of ChatBots, which would act as a catalyst to the move to cloud solutions, like Ranjan Tayal, SVP & SBU Head – HCM Solution, Ramco Systems, feels strongly. He is seconded by Ninad Raval, Director Product and Design, Flock here.

ChatBots as intelligent agents are also likely to transform business economics much beyond what emails did, Tayal augurs. “Emails and other enterprise messaging were more focused towards simpler, easier and more efficient communications between people. Over the years they have continued to improve, but, people involvement has been a fundamental part. ChatBots, in comparison, are going beyond and eliminating need for people.”

Raval is also watching keenly the rise of artificial intelligence of chatbots and the ability to plug in third party applications, as the next lane after chat-apps. “All frequently used apps like Google Docs, Dropbox, GitHub, etc. can now be directly integrated, while completely letting go of the hassle of switching between multiple apps.”



Image courtesy of vectorolie at freedigitalphotos

Bots give context-based appropriate responses: Nilesh Sangoi, Meru Cabs

As an early adopter himself, Nilesh Sangoi, Chief Technology Officer of [MeruCabs Pvt. Ltd.](#) debunks skepticism around bots. “As to apps, the experience differs on the aspect of structure. In an app, the creator decides the interaction and flow but a bot gives you freedom on what you want to say and when. It gives context and appropriate response based on that. Despite initial euphoria, people cannot handle too many apps in practical sense. Many installed apps never get used. Discoverability of apps or promotions is also an issue. Bots can be used in several dimensions.”



Image courtesy of franky242 at freedigitalphotos

ChatBots are likely to transform business economics: Ranjan Tayal, Ramco Systems
Bots also house the possibility (at least, on paper) of pre-empting the curse of noise that is inevitably going to challenge chat-tools. In fact, if email was facing its issues because of the tangled pile it generated or the visibility of ‘actual’/’action’ information it hampered, then chat-tools could also run the same cliff soon and much more dangerously.

Noise and clutter does affect productivity, as Rahul Asave, Principal Product Manager, Atlassian (makers of HipChat) accepts and so does Pat Sullivan, CEO of Ryver. More so as it could be an irony that attacks chat-tools where it hurts most – the very notion of efficiency and speed.

It is natural and tempting to get lost in constant notifications and chat-flow for any person. That’s when a tool turns into a paradox- a distraction.

There is a difference between chat and work discussion and we are cognizant of that, Asave concedes.

Sullivan also acknowledges how Signal vs. Noise is a big issue in this space. “It’s easy for certain people to be pulled into a joke or something fun and shift away from work. So we are putting in a lot of time to retain the engagement

and fun aspect without sacrificing actual work and without letting ‘noise’ take over.”

Although players are working hard to sort that issue out in time, bots might present a quick fix already.

That said, apps with chat and messaging muscle, are not going to bite the dust too soon – whether it is the brownfield of emails and software they face on one side or the Greenfield of bots that beckons from the other one.

Cobblers still afar

No one is nodding to the label of ‘chat another fad’ – yet.

Chat-rooms will not fizz out soon because we are at the next stage in a bigger evolution, Asave feels while Sullivan brings forth the aspect that ten years from now, it would not occur to anyone in business that there used to be something called email. He arms his argument with enough wit when he concludes that email won’t be completely displaced. “They would be around, like cockroaches of the Internet world. But their relevance would become less and less.”

What can definitely not be ignored is the user experience part which is around the millennial workforce, who grew up with internet and devices, and is exceptionally comfortable with texting, unlike the generation before. With rising number of millennials in the workforce, this momentum is all but looking to gain.

Chat-tools would soon stop being the odd sight or the new thing at workplace and for some offices they may even be the valley they jump to get aboard the next ‘in-vogue’ thing. In any case, the heels have certainly provided a lot of staccato to wake people up to some outmoded ways of making work happen.

Specially when one considers context-switching headache of a number of applications, fragmented nature of office tools, visibility of data at the exact millisecond of action, the laundry bag of emails and the very presence of an extremely-mobile and tech-savvy (and consequentially, a tad impatient) workforce.

That should explain the strange things that are adorning walls and treadmills today. But maybe it could get stranger as we move ahead. Who could have thought that Toby-s can actually talk? Who could have thought that a rhino-head could match with the curtain on a wall? Who could have thought that sandals-with-socks (yes, that's right – it's official now) would be in fashion someday?

Yet, they do. All one can do, in turn, is stick to this – Keep running.