

Cool Vendors in Employee Engagement and Enablement in the Digital Workplace

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Digital workplace Cool Vendors are demonstrating that they can help workers connect to the people, information, chatbots and places that will enable new ways of working. Here, we share five vendors for application leaders exploring key trends to engage and enable employees for the future of work.

Key Findings

- New vendors are rethinking the collaboration tool categories that employees work with every day, looking to make a mark with a focus on business workflows, differentiated features and deployment options.
- Computer vision is demonstrating its value and flexibility as a technology enabler that enhances worker effectiveness with just-in-time information.
- Artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual personal assistants (VPAs) are weaving their way into the workplace, finding places to be of assistance, answering employee questions and assuming routine manual tasks to save time.

Recommendations

Application leaders responsible for digital workplace application initiatives should:

- Modernize workflows by revisiting traditional office applications such as instant messaging and spreadsheets, and by experimenting with alternatives that offer more control and flexibility.
- Augment worker memory by using visual recognition technology and tools to enable better knowledge access and sharing to improve employee effectiveness.
- Improve employee engagement by providing workers with access to interactive virtual assistants that can answer common questions and new flexible workspaces with essential business services.

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Analysis

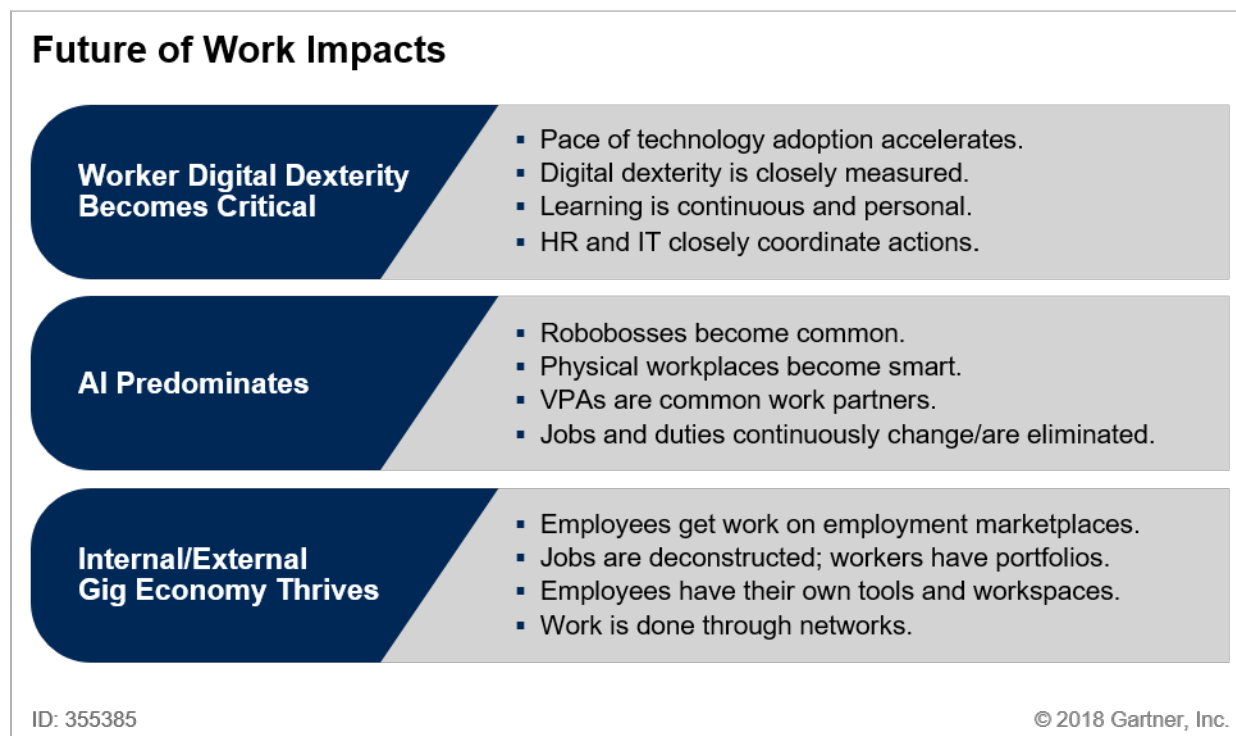
This research does not constitute an exhaustive list of vendors in any given technology area, but rather is designed to highlight interesting, new and innovative vendors, products and services. Gartner disclaims all warranties, express or implied, with respect to this research, including any warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose.

What You Need to Know

Today’s enterprises have many standardized applications and services that help them operate effectively. But application leaders responsible for digital workplace applications still need to keep their eyes on the horizon for new ways of working. One way to do this is to reimagine today’s work as it might be accomplished a few years in the future and investigate the technologies being developed by small, forward-thinking vendors. Beginning experiments with these vendors may lead to big impacts.

To get started, a digital workplace program should embrace these expectations, which are identified in the Gartner research note “Anticipate and Exploit the Top 12 Future Work Trends” and further summarized in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Future of Work Impacts



AI = artificial intelligence; VPA = virtual personal assistant

Source: Gartner (September 2018)

Enterprises preparing for the future of work must offer engaging, consumerlike experiences and deliver technologies that enable, rather than hinder, streamlined work execution. One serious challenge is that any experiment with new vendor technology is really a tactical measure that may or may not lead to a strategic benefit. It is a data-gathering effort that may lead to value creation. It is not free from risk. With this in mind, while considering the Cool Vendors in this report, application leaders should examine how they also connect to the categories and impacts for the future of work.

Employees have their own tools and workspaces: *Traditional software for office collaboration is evolving and traditional ideas about workspace are being reimaged.*

Business users will never escape spreadsheets, but Airtable makes us rethink what a spreadsheet program should do and its place in our workflow, which, for some workers, is at the center of everything. Mattermost helps us take back control of the critical conversations we're having in enterprise chat and offers a platform with integrations that enable the execution of work from end to end.

VPAs are common work partners: *We can expect more work to hinge on the delivery of information to employees at the time of need, as answered by Socrates, but also as they need it contextually and in real time, thanks to Polarity.*

Polarity uses computer vision to take what we see on screen, analyze it and provide relevant information. Imagine an overlay on top of any application that might augment worker memory with new details to add richness and insight. Socrates interacts with workers via messaging and chatbots and helps them save time. Workers can skip wading through out-of-date and redundant material. Socrates sifts through this material for them, providing current answers about workplace topics such as company policies or how to find a subject matter expert. Connecting context-specific VPAs with rich functionality that do just what we need, just where we need it, will be a common practice to improve many different kinds of work.

Internal/external gig economy thrives: *More of the workforce will participate as freelancers for different employers and will need physical space in which to work, provided by MySpot.*

MySpot, like an Airbnb for office space, gives remote and mobile workers access to necessary services and new locations that might sit empty with unused potential. In a digital workplace, the physical workplace that an employer offers is a material indicator of whether all employees are considered first-class citizens.

Airtable

San Francisco, California, U.S. (airtable.com)

Analysis by Jim Hare and Craig Roth

Why Cool: Airtable is cool because it turns business users into self-sufficient citizen developers who can create powerful collaborative applications and workflows to support their own unique work practices. Airtable takes formerly siloed and static sources of data and makes them dynamic and the foundation for integrations, but it also enables automation that streamlines work and saves time. The spreadsheet-based design is based on the premise that enterprise workers already know how to do their jobs; they just need self-service tools with easy access to their data to create applications to accelerate their routine processes and innovate.

Airtable has taken the simplicity that users like from spreadsheets and combined it with the capabilities of a database, but without the complexity. It can store information in a spreadsheet that is visually appealing and easy to use. But it is also powerful enough to act as a database that businesses can use for light customer relationship management, task management, project planning, and inventory tracking.

Airtable's customers include Carnival Cruise Line, Condé Nast Entertainment and WeWork. Customer use cases include:

- A director of textiles at a global fashion company building a real-time fabric sourcing pipeline for use by its fashion design team
- A postproduction supervisor at a top-three film and entertainment company creating the postproduction system to manage its entire multibillion dollar budget

Airtable offers both paid and free options. The least expensive paid option is \$10 per month. There are also Pro and Enterprise tiers that offer more records and space. Airtable also offers hundreds of

templates for nonprofits, startups, venture capital firms, engineers, publishers and firms to get started quickly.

Challenges: Airtable is less well-known than other spreadsheet collaboration tools like Microsoft Excel, Google Sheets and Smartsheet. The product has unique features, like linking records between tables and “blocks” to create custom applications that make the product better than a typical spreadsheet. However, the benefits of Airtable are not apparent until an enterprise worker starts using the product to build an app. For example, the ability to take data and then change the view of it from grid to calendar to Kanban can make it consumable by different roles for different purposes. To make money, Airtable needs to convince “freemium” users to upgrade to either the Pro or Enterprise version.

Who Should Care: Consider Airtable if:

- Your workers prefer the experience of handling data, tasks and workflows, and collaborating within spreadsheets
- Your brand marketing, creative production/operations, product marketing, and physical product production teams are looking for a new way to easily build workflow-based applications to replace their traditional spreadsheets

Mattermost

Palo Alto, California, U.S. (mattermost.com)

Analysis by Adam Preset

Why Cool: Mattermost is cool because its workstream collaboration solution reduces risk and dependency on cloud services, gives buyers visibility into the code, and enables deeper customization to match exact business models and needs.

Companies such as Uber have left Slack and gone to Mattermost, which is based on open-source technology. Its hybrid deployment model gives enterprises more control over hosting options, such as via public or private cloud, than Slack and similar SaaS-only chat platforms. To smooth the migration path from cloud services to an enterprise hosting its own workstream collaboration, Mattermost can even import Slack channels and users. Organizations with rigid compliance needs, including operational retention of complete message history, have been able to migrate to Mattermost from legacy services, such as messaging platforms based on XMPP, with full fidelity.

Although a newer market entrant relative to significant competitors, Mattermost and its developer community already offer more than 500 DevOps and enterprise integrations. This increases the utility of its platform and makes it malleable to suit a variety of IT and line-of-business workflows.

While Mattermost does have a free offering that can be self-hosted, similar to the freemium products from cloud-based competitors, its focus is firmly on differentiating for demanding enterprise customers. Support for single sign-on, high-availability, corporate directory integration, configurable user permissions, multifactor authentication, Elasticsearch, custom-data retention

policies and compliance reporting are “baked in.” Its deployment options are flexible and it suits organizations that might demand installations on public, hybrid or private clouds at scale. Mattermost is the most prominent premises-based offering in this market with the impending end of life of Atlassian Hipchat Data Center and Hipchat Server.

Challenges: Mattermost differentiates itself from competitors that are cloud-only offerings, which makes it an outlier to market trends. Some significant options in the field include:

- Slack, which has much of the workstream collaboration mind share
- Microsoft Teams, which is rising in interest as it comes as part of the Office 365 bundle and now has a free version
- Cisco Webex Teams, rebranded from Cisco Spark, which sits within a portfolio of other cloud services for meetings and calling

Some prospects that look at Mattermost also find that it is differentiated by the features it does not have. For example, Mattermost does not have its own audio and video meeting capability. Instead, Mattermost plans to support third-party conferencing solutions via plug-ins. A plug-in is available today that allows for integration of meeting functionality provided by Zoom into the Mattermost user interface for a continuous experience. Additional integrations are being developed, including integration with Cisco Webex, which is planned for 1Q19.

Mattermost buyers that use another meeting solution not supported via integration must switch applications into that separate meeting solution. As workers expect asynchronous and synchronous collaboration in workstream collaboration tools, it is more common to see offerings where escalation from chat into a voice or video call is a built-in capability.

Mattermost’s catalog of business application integrations is not as large as some competitors. Although having the right ones for buyer needs is more important than having the most, this could reduce the appeal of Mattermost for some prospective buyers.

Lastly, without a SaaS offering, Mattermost will appeal less to some organizations that would rather not deal with the details of hosting.

Who Should Care: Consider Mattermost if:

- You seek a collaboration product for your digital workplace services portfolio that enables conversation, content sharing, and the ability to customize workflows and integrations.
- You prefer to deploy and operate on-premises services because they offer you more control than cloud, or because your regulatory or compliance requirements demand it.
- You have investigated other SaaS-based workstream collaboration platforms but found them lacking in necessary features or too opaque, or you prefer the transparency of open-source applications.

MySpot

Rome, Italy (www.myspohub.com)

Analysis by Federica Troni

Why Cool: MySpot is cool because it is a matching platform that accommodates the needs of professionals looking for places to work, concentrate and communicate. It leverages spaces within existing facilities to increase their utilization and drive revenue. Businesses and individuals make workspaces available, typically at nonpeak times, and MySpot facilitates the filling of them. MySpot sees traction today in the following spaces:

- Retailers — hotels, bars, restaurants, fitness centers
- Public administrations — museums, libraries, parks
- Working spaces in office buildings, coworking and business centers

Facilities offer different degrees of services (e.g., Wi-Fi, printing, meeting spaces, refreshments) and are offered according to their characteristics and suitability for different tasks. Usage is typically charged on an hourly or daily rate.

MySpot was created as a B2C platform operating mainly in Rome and Milan. However, in 2017, it developed a B2B offering for enterprises that want to offer this service to their highly mobile, agile workforce, with coverage throughout Italy and internationally (Copenhagen, Berlin, Lisbon and the Canary Islands, with further expansion planned).

MySpot is expanding its features set by developing a virtual assistant that can guide employees through the choice of working spaces both within and outside the corporate premises, based on their requirements, preference and the activities that they need to accomplish. Features currently offered include:

- Agency sales location coworking (B2C and B2B)
- Booking of individual and team spaces (B2B)
- Search for locations used by professionals with complementary skills
- Occupancy monitoring and environmental conditions (B2B)
- Employee access pass to working spaces (B2B)
- Meeting assistant (B2C and B2B)
- Virtual concierge

MySpot also partners with communities of nomadic workers in specific areas (such as agile development) to facilitate cross-pollination and spontaneous collaboration within common spaces across all types of professionals using the service.

Challenges: Scalability of the business can be slowed down by the evaluation of new hosts and an onboarding process for new community members. Retailers and other organizations that join the platform need training on transforming their service and offering a different experience to that of their traditional clients/users. The MySpot platform gets natural traction in big cities, but selection of

new hosts may be more problematic in smaller towns, making it somewhat complex to have a pervasive national/regional offering. Cultural and traditional enterprise mindsets can be hurdles. For example, midsize enterprises in Italy have not been high adopters of the platform as they have less focus on the needs of remote workers.

Who Should Care: Consider MySpot if:

- Your organization needs to accommodate the requirements of agile and highly mobile professionals in Italy, but you are currently unable or unwilling to expand corporate premises
- Your corporate facilities management tends to be traditional but you seek an option such as MySpot to complement and extend your office space offering to mobile and remote professionals
- Your facilities are underutilized and you can identify portions to be open and shared with freelancers and external workers
- Prior to an office change or renovation, you would like to offer your users the opportunity to experience new office layouts and ways to work

Polarity

Farmington, Connecticut, U.S. (polarity.io)

Analysis by Tuong Huy Nguyen

Why Cool: Polarity's solution visually represents a team's institutional knowledge over the top of its existing tools and workflows to help reduce mental juggling for workers dealing with complex issues. The platform uses computer vision (a combination of optical character recognition [OCR] and image recognition) to analyze onscreen text and images in real time, then enhances it with an overlay of relevant and actionable information to facilitate the employee's work. For example: overlaying street addresses with maps or location images to help group navigation tasks; or overlaying a co-worker's annotations about an IP address to identify IT-business asset context for network defenders or system administrators.

The solution is positioned as a memory augmentation tool for teams of knowledge workers in areas such as information security, intelligence, sales and the financial sector. But it has much broader potential across other areas of deskbound and desk-less workers (for example, in augmented reality) — any job that can be improved by adding contextual information. Overlays can be provided via a window, or in-line with the application. Functionality can be further extended by building on top of Polarity's open-source framework to access data via APIs.

Challenges: Polarity's solution augments teams of knowledge workers with what the company describes as a collective memory. The rapid advancement of deep neural networks could potentially cause many of these workers' tasks to become fully automated and, if the teams of knowledge workers go away, Polarity will provide very little value. Additionally, the value proposition for this solution may not be high enough to justify investment in the technology, particularly if knowledge workers all work from within the same screen or application.

Growing interest in computer vision technologies may also quickly commoditize part of Polarity's technical value proposition as algorithms to accurately identify and analyze text, video and images become more available.

Who Should Care: Consider Polarity if:

- You believe your organization would benefit from new work efficiencies by leveraging group and centralized knowledge
- You're looking for new services to add to your digital workplace service portfolio to increase knowledge worker productivity and effectiveness
- You struggle to enable cross-team or cross-workflow collaboration

Socrates.ai

San Francisco, California, U.S. (socrates.ai)

Analysis by Marty Resnick

Why Cool: Socrates.ai offers an intelligence engine that anticipates the needs of individual workers. What this means is that employees could use the tools they prefer to ask for customized recommendations, get consistent answers to questions (i.e., company policies), connect to subject matter experts within their organization, and immediately act on the information through conversational methodologies such as chatbots and messaging.

An example would be an employee who wants to take a vacation but is unaware of the company policy, how many days he has available, and what the approval process is. The employee can start to ask a question of the Socrates.ai chatbot, which uses natural-language processing (NLP) to interpret the need without requiring exact matches to rigid search terms. Socrates then connects with the HR or benefits system to receive the data it needs, requests the date(s), and kicks off the approval process, which is then facilitated to completion by the Socrates.ai system. If Socrates detects friction in the interaction, it knows to escalate to a human.

Socrates.ai works with a couple of global companies, but primarily works with smaller enterprises currently. Its technology is based on NLP with structured learning for AI, and conversational user interface technology (e.g., chatbots).

Socrates.ai is best suited for organizations with lots of documentation that sometimes has been updated, but old versions of conflicting information are still resident. Also, in some cases, documentation is hard to find in existing systems, making it time-consuming and frustrating for users. Socrates.ai is available both in SaaS (cloud) and as an on-premises solution.

Challenges: Socrates.ai is in a growing and competitive market in which the focus is on employees and customers using more NLP and less clicks/touch to get their jobs done. It may be difficult to differentiate between other enterprise virtual assistants, documentation aggregation tools and bot technologies for automating processes. Furthermore, organizations may be looking to their existing

enterprise software providers to provide these types of tools, which are implemented and integrated out of the box with their solutions.

Who Should Care: Consider Socrates.ai if:

- Your human resource and compliance teams are looking for ways to drive enrollment and benefits, while making sure employment tasks are handled in a timely and consistent way.
- Your enterprise and data architects seek ways to bring together and organize heterogeneous forms of documentation and data — Socrates.ai technology can help aggregate and present the data, at the time of need.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

“Cool Vendors in Digital Dexterity and AI for the Digital Workplace”

“Anticipate and Exploit the Top 12 Future of Work Trends”

“Predicts 2018: Digital Workplace Technologies”

“Digital Workplace Program Primer for 2018”

Evidence

[Atlassian and Slack FAQ](#)

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