

REPORT REPRINT

harmon.ie looks to 'topic computing' to improve worker productivity

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03 AUG 2017

The company is shifting its focus to topic computing and promoting the concept as a discipline that can help improve productivity. It entails connecting business information organized by topics to address information overload and improve the productivity of knowledge workers.

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Harmon.ie develops user-experience tools for the digital workspace. The company is a proponent of ‘topic computing,’ a concept it promotes as a computing discipline to address the challenge of information overload. Topic computing seeks to provide a streamlined user experience that connects business information in a meaningful way, organized by topic. Harmon.ie contends that this approach will enable knowledge workers – those whose job involves handling or using information – to stay focused, thereby improving productivity.

THE 451 TAKE

Harmon.ie is on solid ground when it comes to enterprise productivity. Its products have been on the market for almost 10 years and its customer base includes well-known companies. We have yet to see if topic computing will take hold and evolve into a category of its own. We believe, however, that the concept makes sense and conveys the value proposition and differentiation for harmon.ie Collage. This is a new concept and the company will face a challenge in convincing IT decision-makers to allocate budget for this technology. Harmon.ie could benefit from positioning Collage within the framework of business communications and team collaboration because it enables knowledge workers to make better use of these technologies.

CONTEXT

Harmon.ie develops user-experience tools for the digital workspace. The company was founded in 2008 and is headquartered in Boston, with offices in London, Paris, Stuttgart and Tel Aviv. It currently has 70 employees. 451 Research estimates the company’s revenue in 2016 to be in the range of \$7-10m.

When we started covering harmon.ie in early 2016, it had recently launched harmon.ie Collage, an application designed to provide a single contextual stream of business information including email, business applications, documents and information from intelligent network graphs like Office Graph.

Harmon.ie contends that the core value of Collage lies in its ability to enable ‘topic computing.’ Topic computing enables workers to interact with computers in terms of important subjects such as customers, products or services, rather than individual business processes exposed through applications like Salesforce, Workday and Outlook. It seeks to enable workers to focus on customers, projects and products in a seamless operation, regardless of where the information originates.

The company believes distractions of toggling between apps to get business done hinder productivity. Topic computing seeks to streamline the user experience that connects business information in a meaningful way to eliminate these distractions. It contends that focusing on related topics – which is how the human brain works – lessens cognitive load, enabling knowledge workers to be more productive.

Harmon.ie has received several patents related to topic extraction and matching capabilities, as well as generating contextual information streams across multiple data sources.

PRODUCTS

Collage aims to eliminate ‘app noise’ and remove the need for workers to open multiple, process-specific applications and email chains by automatically organizing them by topic within an email sidebar.

When a worker views an email message, Collage uses artificial intelligence (AI), in the form of natural language processing (NLP) to automatically extract relevant ‘topics’ from the email message. It then locates relevant notifications from other information sources – including email, business apps, documents, social tools like Yammer or Chatter, and graph-based networks such as Microsoft Graph – that include at least one of the topics identified in the email message. Collage prioritizes the notifications and displays the most relevant at the top of the screen. This enables workers to focus on their work rather than manipulating technology looking for information.

Collage allows users to click on notifications in the activity stream to launch the appropriate native apps 'in context' to complete tasks without losing focus on the task at hand. For example, when a user clicks on a Salesforce update, Collage will launch the application in the browser and open the appropriate record. The worker can edit the record, close the browser and return to the task he or she was working on, allowing the worker to stay focused on the task.

Collage is available as a cloud service within Outlook and as a mobile application for Android and iOS.

STRATEGY

Harmon.ie's products have been on the market since 2008. In its last market update earlier this year, the company reported a 220% Y/Y growth in enterprise licenses. It added more than 235 new customers, driving 73% Y/Y growth in partner-led sales. Key clients added include Daimler, Hilton Worldwide Holdings, Kaplan International and Nature Conservancy of Canada.

For small clients (fewer than 200 users) the company sells via an e-commerce site. Larger deals are sold via partners and a direct sales force. The company operates globally; key markets include North America and Europe, as well as English-speaking Asian countries like Australia, New Zealand and Singapore.

Collage is sold on a per-user subscription basis. The starting cost for a subscription is \$5 per user per month, with volume discounts available. Users can access Collage in a browser window on multiple endpoints.

The company states it has over 1,500 enterprise customers worldwide. Other named clients include Aon Hewitt, BearingPoint, British Land, Central Bank of Ireland, Citi, Next Plc, Government of Canada, Freddie Mac, General Dynamics, Investec, Leonhard Weiss, Oppenheimer Funds and Pepco.

COMPETITION

Topic computing is a new concept and we have yet to see if it will take hold as a computing discipline or a sub-category under the umbrella of enterprise productivity applications. There is an overlap with AI-driven initiatives that focus on productivity and team collaboration from vendors like Google and Microsoft. It can be argued that topic computing is a variation of these initiatives. We believe, however, that the concept has merit and is helpful for understanding the unique elements in harmon.ie's approach to productivity.

A key differentiation for harmon.ie Collage is its focus is on enabling 'deep work,' which we define as 'the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task.' Collage provides notification aggregation, but we believe its value resides in managing the quality of information rather than just the volume.

Based on its functionality, we believe harmon.ie Collage competes with other startups focused on developing AI-driven productivity applications for the enterprise. This includes companies like Astro Technology, a startup focused on applying AI to improve email and business communications, and Redkix, an application that aims to reduce distraction and help employees prioritize by bringing together chat and email into a consolidated, intelligent inbox. Other competitors include Missive, an app with capabilities for collaborative email and threaded chats, and Front App, an app for managing team inboxes.

As previously noted, email service providers Google and Microsoft also seek to address the challenges inherent in business communications by enhancing their business communications and productivity tools with AI. We believe Slack – which aims to become a platform for enterprise productivity – is also an indirect competitor for harmon.ie Collage.

SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS

With almost 10 years under its belt, harmon.ie has gained significant experience with enterprise productivity applications. The company is growing in terms of revenue and new clients, with well-known brands in its client roster.

WEAKNESSES

Collage has been in the market for over a year, but topic computing is a new concept. The company is garnering support from thought leaders in academia and industry, but evangelizing will be an uphill climb. It will require getting onto the radar of IT decision-makers, which can be challenging for new products and categories.

OPPORTUNITIES

Information overload is still a problem that knowledge workers struggle with. It is getting worse given the growing trend toward communications-enabled workflows.

THREATS

The concept of 'topic computing' overlaps with initiatives from major players like Cisco, Google and Microsoft, which are looking to enhance their business communications and productivity portfolios with artificial intelligence. These vendors could seek to expand their efforts; there is also a risk that their initiatives could overshadow harmon.ie's efforts to promote topic computing.