Analysis of Types and Patterns of Innovation at Slack Technologies

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The two technological innovations I associate with Slack Technologies are their flagship product Slack and the way that product integrates with the tools and services on which users already rely. The Slack app's approach to communication is loosely based on the concepts of several dominant designs: Internet Relay Chat (IRC), instant messaging (IM), and email (Thomas, 2013). Likewise, the app's architecture builds on stable - as opposed to bleeding-edge - designs and components on all platforms (Almaer, 2014), which I believe greatly contributes to their ability to integrate.

The Slack app focuses on improving team communication with incremental, competence-enhancing innovations by borrowing the concept of "channels" centering on a topic of discussion from IRC, private messages from IM clients, and email’s ability to search and star conversations. Search is one of the company’s core values (“From 0 to $1B - Slack’s Founder Shares Their Epic Launch Strategy,” n.d., p. 0), and by bringing these conversations together under one roof this process innovation helps improve the way that teams communicate by virtually eliminating irrelevant information and reducing decision overhead.

While Slack ostensibly aims to replace email and other forms of communication in the business world, it also integrates with the tools and services already utilized in their users' workflows and allows users to develop their own integrations based on industry standards. By Slack’s count, over 800,000 integrations setup by users send over 3 million messages per day (McCracken, 2015) through their service. This means that to act on important information, one doesn’t need to switch applications, open a new tab, or login to another service; the relevant information is available and searchable in Slack. Knowing that you can see last quarter’s product forecast without having to take the time out of someone’s else workday to provide the information means that users have more time to put that information to use.

The user response has been unprecedented: after 1 year they had over 500,000 daily active users and they have seen a 35% increase in those users in 2015 alone (McCracken, 2015; Weber, 2015). The company quadrupled active users in the month before "official" launch (Andreessen, 2014), and that was without a Facebook page (Bort, 2014). This differs from the traditional diffusion s-curve which shows slow adoption rates at the beginning of a technology; I believe this is due to the incremental focus on innovation Slack Technologies has adopted. By not threatening current processes or tools with radical technology or new architecture, this component-based approach affords Slack the ability to meet the needs of virtually any team while keeping development costs low, thus increasing their product adoption rates (“From 0 to $1B - Slack’s Founder Shares Their Epic Launch Strategy,” n.d.). Performance improvement s-curves have also benefited from the component-based approach to innovation; 8000 companies signed up in the first 24 hours of the private beta, and the beta phase was only 6 months (McCracken, 2015). Slack churns out improvements almost daily (“#changelog from:slackhq - Twitter Search,” n.d.), even after the beta phase, and shows no sign of slowing down soon contrary to typical performance s-curves. Yet another reason to be wary of using s-curves predicatively.

By focusing on incremental and competence-enhancing innovations focused on centralizing information and improving communication through integration with the tools already populating its users’ workflow, Slack Technologies has afforded itself unprecedented growth and adoption rates for their software. I look forward to seeing how their s-curve looks after another year of growth.

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