Interview

An interview with Aaron Fulkerson, CEO of MindTouch

Aaron Fulkerson

co-founder and CEO of MindTouch in only 2 years, has grown a small open source project into one of the world's most popular and positioned it as No. 1 in open source collaboration (*source*: Sourceforge.net) with millions of users globally and an impressive customer list of Fortune 500 corporations, government agencies and mid-market companies. Before co-founding MindTouch, Fulkerson was a member of Microsoft's Advanced Strategies and Policies division and worked on distributed systems research. Previously, he owned and operated a successful software and information technology consulting firm, Gurion Digital LLP. He has held senior positions at software startups, and has helped to launch several non-profits and businesses outside the software industry. He received his BS in Computer Science from University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. He resides in San Diego, CA with his wife and two children.

ABSTRACT In less than 3 years, Aaron has grown MindTouch from a small open source project into one of the world's most popular open source collaboration platforms. Its wiki-like platform enables tens of millions of users globally to connect and customize enterprise systems, social tools and web services. The enterprise 2.0 and open source collaboration markets continue to grow rapidly as companies are operating under 'lite' IT budgets for the foreseeable future: Enterprise spending on Web 2.0 technologies is predicted by Forrester to grow strongly over the next 5 years, reaching US\$4.6 billion globally by 2013 and MindTouch was cited by Forrester as the *best alternative* to industry heavyweights Microsoft and IBM.

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MM: Okay, we are here with Aaron Fulkerson of MindTouch. Aaron, if you would let us start off with a little bit of your personal background and then as a lead up into kind of an overall profile with MindTouch.

AF: I am the CEO and one of the founders of *MindTouch*. I have a background working on large-scale distributed systems in Microsoft on research, and have done a lot of work in private consulting for my own firm around knowledge management, information portals, Internet, Extranet, etc. So, in 2005, when we started MindTouch, we set out to solve the problem of collaboration and specifically the problem of disconnected application and data file loads.

MM: Why don't you bring us up to speed a little bit in terms of kind of the basic trends, historical trends of collaboration and the underlying kind of shared files, shared files repositories, and perhaps touch a little bit on project management?

AF: The way that we have been collaborating using software really dates back to 1979 with the introduction of VisiCalc, the first spreadsheet application, and frankly things have not changed much since then. During the 1990s, we had this proliferation of portal frameworks that would accelerate the development of custom solutions and then of course document management systems, and, more recently, we have seen a SharePoint in the last 5–6 years just ramped up in adoption and revenue growth, and you look at say SharePoint and it is pretty clear what SharePoint it is, it is a web-based document management system. It is clear that what Microsoft has said is that it's SharePoint moving up stack with SharePoint, which is a new kind of operating system or framework for delivering applications.

MM: Would it not be more accurate to say that rather than an operating system, it is more of a platform for document and business services?

Correspondence:

Aaron Fulkerson
MindTouch, 401 West 'A'
Street, Suite 250, San
Diego, CA 92101, USA
twitter:@Roebot

AF: When I say operating system, it is a more specialized one for business collaboration but it is precisely the same as what we expect from an operating system. It provides a common framework for acceleration of application development. For example, the way Microsoft has begun to bundle things like Microsoft Project Server and Microsoft Excel Server as accessible only through SharePoint. It is clear that the strategy is to position a new kind of collaboration or business operating system that will, as I said, move up stack above whether you are using Linux or Windows or whatever. What matters in this new space is that Microsoft intends to own the productivity or knowledge worker and that is certainly not a bad thing. It is precisely the same model that it employed with the Windows Operating System or Microsoft Exchange, if you think backwards of how Directory Services was killed off by Active Directory being a requirement of Microsoft Exchange. SharePoint.

MM: So, if I am understanding right, as we start to think about and visualize the road map moving forward around collaboration project management, SharePoint becomes a new hub by which to start to lock in things like Excel servers and document and Word servers and other sorts of application and business services.

AF: So, they will increasingly rely on partners to develop third-party applications that will also provide tools to the end SharePoint user. It is very much about building this ecosystem in applications on top of SharePoint. They have obviously got Microsoft Windows Live, which has an advertisement model that could be going after, say, Google Web, but with their web strategy, which is actually quite savvy, they are saying look, this is a platform that we own and we are going to build a very massive ecosystem on top of this platform for delivering collaboration and business applications.

From a SharePoint perspective, it is clear that everything is moving on the web. They're saying, this is our new web platform and, obviously coming for the world's largest software company, that is usually significant. This concept of rapid application development and how easily you can pull content from different places is what MindTouch makes possible. Unlike SharePoint, non-programmers

should be able to federate their enterprise system, whether it is content management systems and enterprise content management systems, databases, digital asset management systems, web service infrastructure, ERP, CRM, and pull that information into an easily used collaborative environment that end users – not programmers – technical end users but not programmers – can create content work flows, little applications that can provide new kinds of views of data, dashboards, they can automate reports, but that is what MindTouch is focused on and you can see that is where SharePoint is headed as well with the way that they are beginning to message in 2010.

MM: Perhaps you can make the case here of why someone should even consider the MindTouch open source alternative to SharePoint you know, for the most part, most of the companies have already gotten SharePoint as part of their big license.

AF: So, it might not make sense to replace SharePoint with MindTouch, it might make more sense to extend SharePoint with MindTouch. The largest companies that MindTouch has are Fortune 500 customers, which have replaced SharePoint, but most, instead, augment SharePoint with MindTouch and let me first start by explaining the problem that MindTouch solves and this is getting access to information that is inherently disconnected, unstructured and scattered across a plethora of disparate systems. I mentioned some of them, database, ERP, CRM etc.

MM: Before we go there, is that not basically the case for, you know, the economies and the file nets and these other kind of enterprise search platforms to go in and auto classify, organize and make into more logical clumps of stuff all of that dark content?

AF: Yeah, that is a great point and no, this is something that is very different from that. What MindTouch allows an end user to do is to have an interface where totally non-technical users can collaborate, capture notes, attach files, comments, but then also slightly technically people, not programmers, but commonly we see business analysts, business power users, even savvy sales people, who will query data from external systems like a CRM system, pull it into MindTouch, inside this collaborative interface, and then very easily collaborate and share that

information and the specific examples that I can give you is all of us can relate to this. For example, let's say I have a particular work objective that I have to achieve. In order for me to achieve that work objective, I have to go to a file server, an email. I have to do some web searches. I have to go to my internet. I go to my CRM system and I gather all this information that is scattered across all of these systems and then I laboriously hammer it together into, guess what, a collection of new Microsoft office documents, but then I send it off to another file or e-mail or file server and, then 3 months later, I say gee I know I worked on a project just like this 3 months ago, I am going to go find those files, and reconstitute them so that I can again make what I call, and most people call, external information, information in a format that I can make a decision based on or share with a colleague so that they can make a decision based on it. So this is the model for collaboration that we have been using since 1979 with the introduction of MindTouch. The only thing that changed is that there are a whole lot more of these systems where information is scattered about, so what those search companies are doing is finding that dark content as you put it, so that it is easier to find that information, but it is not actionable information. What MindTouch allows you to do is connect these systems very easily without being a programmer and have governance over what you can see, what systems can be accessed, and then create this report or actionable information. Three months from now, I do not have to go back and sift through all these files, I go back to the MindTouch interface and say, 'Oh yeah, the numbers have updated in my account payable system, my support ticketing system, my consent management system etc'. For this audience, a great use case is how our customers, like Exact Target, Auto Desk, Microsoft to name a few, are using MindTouch to automate things like product documentation and technical documentation, pulling content from existing back office system whether it is a digital asset management database or web content management system or a knowledge base and then pushing the content to MindTouch, in many cases opening it up to their end users, partners and customers to then collaborate on the documentation with

moderation and then pulling, extracting the content back out.

MM: Traditionally, with dashboards, the challenge has been that you needed to have nice clean uniform data feeding, some sort of an analytic process or an analytic server by which you could then visually display that analytic information. But the weak link was always that, I have the data but it is not uniform. I do not have an easy way of normalizing it and a lot of the data that I need, I simply cannot get access to.

AF: That is adequately correct you know. You look at the last, I guess, 10 years or so and everybody is building these very sophisticated, heavy web service infrastructures on the top of their data with the expectation that they will be able to get access to our data in the way that we never have and then have a uniform scheme of it, then we can provide dashboards and reporting and automate on top of and, frankly, the dirty truth of it all was the companies that were pushing those web service infrastructures were really pushing tools and not a solution.

MM: Could you just give us a little bit of explanation?

AF: The promises made during that period have yet to be realized and now all of those same vendors were realizing that gee all that our customers want is a much easier way to do machine-to-machine collaboration, which is really what we are talking about here. How do you get that machine to talk to this machine over here in a manner that is as easy as a human talking to a machine, and that is what is again getting very geeky, but the point being that it allows for systems to pull data together and then represent that data in a valuable and usable format for humans. So, this is precisely what MindTouch does, if you look at MindTouch, the whole platform is a collection of the coupled web services, a web service orchestration engine that allows you to orchestrate external system, a very sophisticated access control layer that makes sure that only people who have permission to see data can see data, and a very easily used wiki you like, if you will, that collaboratively interfaces and then of course has got some charting packages and things like that too.

MM: A company we knew was using a project management portal as a way of providing an

interface and having their vendors push production data out of their production and accounting systems into a SQL server database, and then they were mining using reports or some other kind of Online Analytical Processing (OLAP) tool.

AF: What I have seen in the portal frameworks that provide the visualization and of course the analysis of the data is that launching a report is a very laborious task, it takes several months you know, take even a SharePoint installation that is not even as sophisticated as what you just described. For a large company, the analyst will tell you that it is a 10–12-month timeline, costing half a million dollars, right? So, the time it takes to rule out one of these solutions is prohibitive. So, when you say that, well you know, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are evolving and changing, you have to be able to react quickly. I could not agree more. I do not mean to turn it back to MindTouch, but what we have seen by enabling non-programmers to be able to take something, you know reports that were already built by somebody and just make some minor tweaks and come up with something completely different, has completely revolutionized how they can analyze and share information.

So, what I am seeing is that we're empowering them to do things that would take months but now take a matter of days, consistently. A perfect example was a guy here who used to work for a Fortune 1000 company and he had a problem there, where he could never get on a per-project basis. How much of a budget was spent, how much was actually allocated of the allotted budget on a per-project basis? It would take him weeks to get that information and by the time he got the information it was already stale, so he could never achieve an up-to-date analysis on what we have spent on the allotted budget. So, after joining MindTouch, he spoke with an accountant here, who had done a couple of small things in MindTouch previously, said oh I could get that for you, 3 hours later he implemented it. He was pulling out of a Microsoft Dynamics AX system that was then being mashed up with the accounts payable system and you know a week later we did a training session with the sales team, a week later it got sold to customers. So, that is the kind of

speed and agility that MindTouch has enabled and I expect to see in the next 3–5 years some larger software companies like SAP, Oracle and Microsoft pursuing it.

MM: Could you speak to the notion of the particular transition to more of a widget-based solution interface or systems interface as opposed to the more traditional interfaces that we find in traditional applications.

AF: Yeah, there has been a lot of noise around open social, which is the standard that Google helped to define for high framing content. The end result looks much like a widget and these widgets can kind of talk to one another, personally I think that it is cute. I think that it is not anything that is really new other than the ease with which you can pull the information from systems because Google is doing what SAP and others would have done previously with their portal framework on top of their ERP solutions. You know what is happening is that we are returning to where it should have gone to begin with, using open standards which are much less expensive and taking less time to deploy.

MM: So, what we have talked about so far has been this evolution of how companies have begun to organize collaboration and knowledge worker productivity, using next generation tools such as MindTouch. We talked about how SharePoint now becomes in your words the new business operating system or service platform for integrating a whole bunch of other servers and services that are part of the overall Microsoft portfolio and that as we move forward, one of the cases that you have made is that rapid application development becomes critical as well as the ability to syndicate or integrate content and information across the enterprise pulling data and information from systems that may not have ever really anticipated that level of sharing and pulling that information and content into a very social collaborative environment to use yours words, wiki-like and that then shifts to semi-technical users, business analysts in your speak becoming much more part of the process of configuring these tools to meet or achieve very specific business goals or business aims, that summarizes that so far.

AF: Absolutely yes, correct.

MM: So if I could then summarize, in the application industry the value seems to migrate

towards small groups that can create, if you will, specialized tool boxes for very specific groups of users and then provision those tools, configured frameworks. Then business users add their own kind of customization/personalization to these tools or environments. Thereby innovation tends to move away from a kind of a centralized process. Innovation tends to migrate from this centralized command-control/top-down thing to more of a democratic bottom-up process innovation, where the innovation is happening really at the front line with these business analysts and power users.

AF: Yes, yes.

MM: Any other further idea to add to that particular notion.

AF: No, I think that the caveats there are that you want to be using a platform makes sure that you are able to provide governance and security along the entire chain of that process.

MM: Are you saying that SharePoint is insufficient in that respect?

AF: No, I would say that SharePoint is insufficient in its ability to empower non-programmers to build these applications; furthermore, it does a very poor job of being able to federate external systems. When I say federate that means connect external systems, pull data into SharePoint 2010, particularly if you are a non-programmer.

MM: So as we start to move towards the conclusion of this interview, is there any kind of last words you would like to share with us.

AF: Yes, what I would like to say is that I encourage all of the readers to take a look at *MindTouch*.

MM: Thank you very much and this has been quite informative and I look forward to continuing our conversation in the future.

AF: Thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it.