

Building A Culture Of Collaboration: Mountain Equipment Co-op

Who is Mountain Equipment Co-op?



Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) was founded in 1971 by six Canadian climbers who wanted a place to buy gear not carried by conventional retailers: gear for mountaineering, rock climbing, ski touring and hiking.

Today, MEC is a member-owned cooperative and Canada's largest supplier of gear for self-propelled outdoor recreation.

Quick Facts:

- 3.2 million members
- 14 stores
- 1500 staff
- 2009 sales: **\$262 million**
- 2009 contributions to community projects: **\$2.5 million**

Home page of Mondo, MEC's ThoughtFarmer-powered intranet

MEC's social intranet, Mondo, is helping bring the company together from coast to coast as never before.

An organization's culture – the values it projects, the passions and beliefs its members share – may evolve organically, but at some point it becomes a crucial asset, an essential part of the brand.

Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC), the venerable Vancouver-based retail co-op that started selling climbing gear in 1971 and now purveys outdoor equipment of all kinds, knows this perhaps better than most. **The distinctive MEC culture was built and continues to thrive on a strong set of founding values:** environmental sustainability, co-operation and collegiality, and of course, a passion for the great outdoors.

So after it saw rapid expansion over a few years in the mid-2000s – the co-op now has 14 retail outlets across Canada and 1500 employees – MEC realized it needed to overhaul internal communications and **cultivate a more collaborative, two-way style to help knit together its far-flung organization.**

That led to ThoughtFarmer, which MEC has used to create the company's first intranet, called **Mondo** – with the tag line, "work, play, connect."

"Mondo was really key," CIO Georgette Parsons says of ThoughtFarmer's role in the larger MEC initiative. "It's really the centerpiece."

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A grassroots success

Mondo has been an unqualified success. It's challenging, though, to determine the best way to quantify that success. "I'd like to think it has generated increased productivity, reduced waste, possibly improved user service," Parsons says. "I think it has. The question is, how to tangibly measure that – and by the way, as a medium size business, is it really worth our time trying to measure it?"

By at least some tangible measures, though, Mondo is more than meeting objectives. In the six month period from October to March, 2011, users created **9451 pages**, made

7932 comments and attached **3198 documents**.

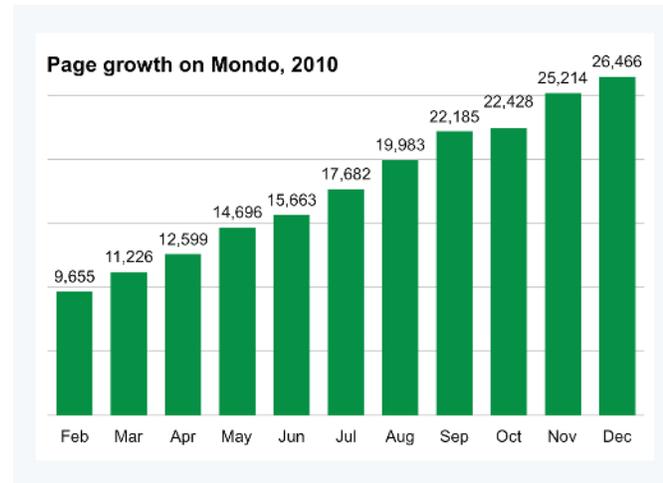
And this has been, to a great extent, a grassroots phenomenon. While head office groups seeded the intranet with essential corporate information, anybody in MEC can create pages – and a gratifying number do.

Gordon Ross, vice president of ThoughtFarmer,

notes that in most public forums and social networks, only 1% of the user population contributes frequently and 9% occasionally, while 90% merely "lurk."

But in ThoughtFarmer organizations like MEC that commit to universal access, those percentages shift to a much more inclusive 10%, 20% and 70%.

A busy discussion on Mondo. At MEC, about 30% of staff are actively participating in content creation.



“Employees themselves grabbed hold of this tool and did much more with it than we ever imagined they would.”

Vanessa Carrington,
Internal Communications Specialist



Jackson says... (Aug 31, 2010)

Our spring/summer hire for 2009 was tiny compared to 2008. We also have not completed all the training for those new hires. I will double check with Stephanie but I'm sure she codes everything correctly.



Susan says... (Sep 3, 2010)

Our training budget was large the year we opened here in Burlington and we had one hiring/ training last year so the 2009 numbers are reasonable



Jennifer says... (Sep 3, 2010)

These numbers look correct to me. In 2008 we took on 202 new hires and in 2009 it was only 69, which explains the huge increase in numbers.



J* says... (Sep 3, 2010)

2350 training hours is closer to what happened for us in 2009. The increase is from the push we made towards achieving 100% training for all product essentials, but did not code training time in KRONOS. That being said, I'm not factoring in time for reoccurring training in different SC areas (Fraud, Warranty etc.) or election or credit note support. A rough guess would add in another 300 hours.



Jean-Sébastien says... (Sep 8, 2010)

I'm going to check with our AA to be sure the new code is well understood, because she's just coming back from a year in the States. But I have some questions:

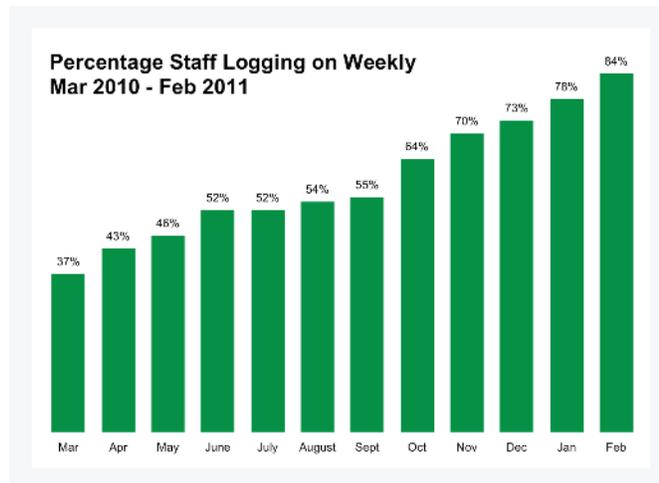
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Adoption targets: met

“Previously we had really struggled to get information centralized and get it out to people,” says internal communications specialist Vanessa Carrington. “But employees themselves grabbed hold of this tool and did much more with it than we ever imagined they would.”

“It’s one central place
for everything.”

Dan Eagen,
Department Administration Assistant



The project team did set a reasonably aggressive target for adoption – 75% of employees using Mondo regularly. It has already exceeded that target.

“When we first rolled it out, usage was at 25% or 30%,” notes Mondo administrator Joey Dubuc. “Now **we’re averaging 85% of employees logging in and using it on a regular basis.**”

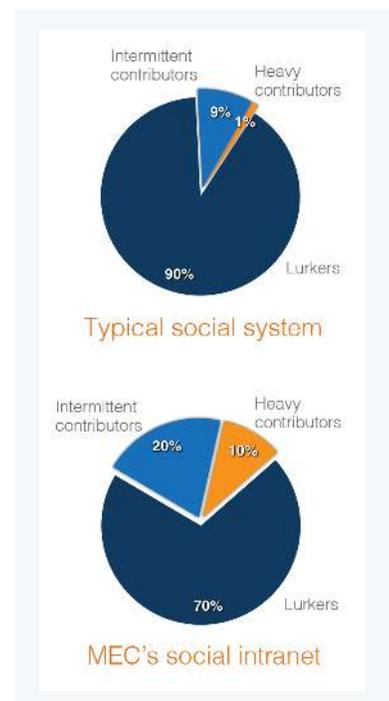
A key breakthrough came when **MEC made its intranet available to employees at home over the intranet.** This was important because many are front-line retail staff who don’t have company e-mail addresses, computers or desks.

“They had no real access to organizational information of any kind if they didn’t make it to a meeting or read a bulletin board,” Parsons says.

The indispensable resource

The company’s strategy was to make Mondo an essential tool for everybody so even part-timers who only come in to work once or twice a week would be obliged to use it. It moved key functions to the intranet, such as shift scheduling for retail staff, using ThoughtFarmer’s calendar functionality. Human resources and other departments posted essential company documents and set up forms – for staff to request time off, for example. **“There are hundreds of forms up on Mondo now, and being used,”** Dubuc says.

The operations group in particular, led by über-user Dan Eagen, the department admin assistant, set up a number of new automated processes,



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sometimes using Logiforms, a third-party open source tool for creating interactive forms that can be embedded in Mondo pages. One for example makes it easy for any store employee to initiate stock replenishment when she sees a low-inventory situation.

“It’s one central place for everything,” Eagen says of Mondo. “That’s its big benefit. People think, ‘Ah, I’m going to go to Mondo and ask for this kayak,’ or whatever – because Mondo is familiar now, they’re comfortable with it, they know how to get there.”

Employee engagement: up

And while they’re there – checking schedules, requesting time off, reordering product – employees are inevitably drawn into the other things going on: the lively forums and interest groups, many of them purely social, that have sprouted around everything from food and drink, to gardening, to cultural pursuits and, of course, outdoor activities of all kinds.

“As a cultural reflection of the organization,” Parsons notes, “Mondo has been very successful.” But it’s more than just a reflection of what was already there.

“It is also resulting in a large increase in engagement,” Eagen says. “For example, here’s something that was posted last night and there are 30 comments on it already. For us to see something like that it was unheard of before.”

“People know so much more about what’s going on now,” Carrington adds. “And not just in their own little hive of cubicles. It makes people feel more valued.”

“People know so much more about what’s going on now.”

Vanessa Carrington,
Internal Communications Specialist

A popular Mondo interest group

The screenshot shows a forum page titled "Creative Thinkers" with a "Join group" button and "View relationships" and "Show group details" links. The main content area lists recent posts:

- Patagonia Moves in on iTunes, with an Eco-Twist**: Published 15 days ago by Kristin. Description: "From their site: 'Buy a song, benefit the environment. Patagonia has teamed up with a diverse group of world-class musicians to help protect and restore our...'"
- Pupulemon**: Published 16 days ago by Joey. Description: "Here's something hilarious contributed by a self-proclaimed yoga dork (not me)..."
- glass technology**: Published 20 days ago by Dianne. Description: "now this is creative thinking (building on apple product design) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6C7IL_eZ38..."

The sidebar on the left contains a "Manage feeds" section with three video links from TEDTalks:

- Rogier van der Heide: Why light needs darkness** (2010)
- Mark Bezos: A life lesson from a volunteer firefighter** (2011)
- Janna Levin: The sound the universe makes** (2011)

Employee engagement is not just a vague touchy-feely concept. **“There is all kinds of research showing a strong correlation between employee engagement and overall organizational success,”** Parsons points out.

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MEC conducted an employee engagement survey five months before launching Mondo, and plans another for May or June 2011. “It will be interesting to see the impact Mondo has had,” she says.

The social dimension

The engagement is not just between employees and the organization either, it’s also between individual employees in different locations – something that was impersonal at best in the past, mainly based on e-mail, or simply didn’t happen.

“You could never really put a face to anyone,” Dubuc says. “You were just throwing out communications, but there was nothing personal about it. Now there’s a remarkable difference because of the social aspects of the tool.”

A typical Mondo employee profile page

The screenshot shows the Mondo intranet interface. At the top, there's a green header with the '40 MEC 1971' logo and the 'mondo' brand name. A search bar is on the right. Below the header is a navigation menu with options like 'DC's Place', 'People', 'All Groups', 'Head Office', 'Stores', 'Work Groups', 'Social', and 'Help'. The main content area displays the profile for 'Vanessa, Internal Communications Specialist'. It includes a 'Vanessa's News Feeds' section with links to 'MEC Jingle Bells Lyrics', 'Pinkbike' (updated 3 hours ago), and 'Newsvine' (updated just now). The 'Newsvine' section lists various news items like 'Wisconsin: GOP Blocks Democrats from Voting' and 'Conservatives: We Are Being Outworked And Out-Organized in Wisconsin Recall'. To the right of the news feeds, there's a bio section for Vanessa, stating 'Vanessa I'm grateful for the invitation to ride the canals' (1 day ago), her phone number (Tel: 604-707-), her email (Vanessa), her birthday, manager (Tim Southam), and her role as a member of various groups. A small avatar of Vanessa is shown on the right side of the profile.

Because employees can see their distant colleague’s pictures and profiles at their personal pages and read their off-the-cuff comments in forums and interest groups, they feel they know them a little. **There is greater ease, more banter and sociability in the business communications**, Dubuc says. **Bottom line: people work better together.** While Mondo is meeting MEC’s broad philosophical objectives, it is also delivering more practical benefits, some of them actually quantifiable.

Eagen points to the stock replenishment app, for example. In the past, the process was opaque and imprecise. Employees had to know who the right person was in their store to go to with an out-of-stock or low-stock situation. Then, reorders had to be organized and sent in batch mode.

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Increased efficiency

“There’s a huge increase of efficiency because you’re only posting something once instead of e-mailing it many times.”

Dan Eagen , Department Administration Assistant

MEC staff sharing ideas on how to improve the inventory count

Now any authorized employee can go to a forms-based Mondo page at any terminal in the store, or even from home, and note product name and stock level.

“Before, in bigger stores like Vancouver or Calgary, it would take one person three to four hours a week to co-ordinate it all,” Eagen says. “Now it takes 15 to 20 minutes total.”

Mondo is also saving Eagen and his colleagues time. The operations department needs to communicate with employees on all kinds of matters, especially upcoming events, both business and social.

When the annual store inventory-taking approached, for example, he would put together a 50-page Word document with instructions and guidelines, e-mail it to every store and then field dozens of often repetitious e-mail queries over the next few weeks.

Now Eagen can make a few modifications to the information created the year before, relink it at the site and field enquiries in the comments section of the page or in a forum set up for the purpose.

“There’s a huge increase of efficiency because you’re only posting something once instead of e-mailing it many times,” he says. “For one of these events, previously I’d probably send 100 to 120 emails. Now I’m posting four or five responses on a page.”

Mondo > Head Office > F&A Dept > Annual Inventory Count - Homepage > Inventory Count Debrief > Count Management

Count Management

Page owner: Kathy Updated Dec 15, 2010 [Translate](#)

- Miscellaneous Count comments, suggestions, improvements
- Procedures and Supporting Documents
- Debrief
- Head Office Support
- Count Management**
- Variance Report Recounts
- Spot Checking
- The Count
- Laying Tags
- Training
- Advance Counts
- Rental Count
- Preparation – Retail Floor and Other Areas
- Preparation – Stock Room

Count Management

- What tools did you use to help manage the count (please attach to this page any documents you created)
- What roles did you create to help manage the count
- What did your "command centre" look like (please attach photos if you have them)

Placido says... (Jan 27)

Nothing special created here, staff knew to approach me when available to pick up edit lists and such as I was the one who took on the role of training them on count procedures.

Our "command center" (I like that) developed organically around the bike shop counter which is very central in the Toronto store.

Mike says... (Jan 27)

Like Toronto, we don't create anything special. I basically stand at optics and hand out tasks to staff - when they complete them, they come back to me to complete the next item on the list. Next year I think I will rent a lazyboy, a flatscreen TV and a beer fridge so I can hand out edit lists while watching NFL play-offs...is that in budget?

Helene says... (Jan 28)

The "command control" was located in the entrance of backstock area. Well located right beside WIS center for a better communication. A table with two chairs were use as a center. The near by backstock computer was handy to double check count procedure, follow e-mails and print document. Tasks for SST individuals were better distributed than last year. Backstock TL was looking after staff during backstock count. For the floor one SST looked after MEC staff (dispatch and what needs to be done) and supervised WIS's work entry in a new depart. A second SST was the link between floor and command center. This person also managed the detailed check. Store manager was located at the command center as a link to WIS manager, delivery of tag number for detail check and supervision of the evolution of count.

MEC’s human resources group loves the fact that having HR information easily accessible on **Mondo means a reduction in time-consuming phone and e-mail enquiries. In fact, employees are sending fewer e-mails overall.** “We’re seeing some real behavioral change there,” Parsons says.

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The collaborative culture

It's not just communications between head office and field. **The real pay-off in efficiency and productivity comes when communications move sideways and employees start solving each other's problems in forums and comments sections** – and that is happening all the time now.

For example, an employee in one store is having trouble assembling a tent for display because the manual has gone missing, so he posts in a relevant forum about it – and an employee at another store scans and sends him the manual or tells him how to proceed.

And it's not a huge leap from there to generating real business-altering ideas from this kind of informal business networking. **“One collaboration of this kind might yield a thought or idea that could be worth quite a lot of money,”** Parsons says.

Why ThoughtFarmer?

MEC took finding the right intranet solution very seriously. It chose ThoughtFarmer over competing solutions, including Microsoft SharePoint and the open source Drupal, after an intensive requirements gathering process that included visits by IT staff to every store, and exhaustive market research, followed by a formal RFP.

A multilingual Mondo page in French



The big reason MEC chose ThoughtFarmer: **ease of use.**

Employees are sending fewer e-mails overall. “We’re seeing some real behavioral change there.”

Georgette Parsons, CIO

“Right out of the box, it was very easy for people to see how to create sections and pages,” notes business analyst Jan Mazereeuw, a key player in the selection process and implementation.

It also did not require a development team to keep it current and bend it to the company’s purposes, unlike alternatives such as SharePoint. **“We have a very lean IS function here,”** notes Parsons. **“ThoughtFarmer’s low total cost of ownership was critical.”**

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And it could handle MEC's bilingual requirements with ease, something many competitors could not do well or at all.

Since the implementation, in which ThoughtFarmer Professional Services was closely involved, the relationship has evolved. "They've become a very strategic partner of ours," Mazereeuw says. "We talk to them almost daily."

The team behind Mondo:
Information Systems at MEC



On the "Mondo at home" project, the effort late last year to move Mondo into the cloud – which was far from trivial, Dubuc says – ThoughtFarmer Professional Services was "with us every step of the way."

Not that MEC is uncritical or willing to let ThoughtFarmer rest on its laurels. Dubuc would like to see better built-in e-mail functionality, for example, and enhanced integration of ThoughtFarmer calendaring with third-party calendar programs.

While the ThoughtFarmer team has generally been responsive to requests for enhancements and modifications, Dubuc says, MEC has a long list of suggestions – some of which, he admits, may not be universal enough in their applicability to other customers to warrant immediate attention.

In the meantime, the tool is doing what MEC expected and hoped. While there are some quantifiable returns in increased efficiency and productivity, the real payback is more strategic and long term.

As Parsons says, "The underpinning philosophy is this whole notion of two-way communication and engagement in the organization. It's not just a push style of communication anymore, it's very interactive."

"We're establishing a collaborative culture here," she adds. "And how do you put a value on a culture?"

How ThoughtFarmer is used at MEC

Who	How	Pay-off
Senior Management	Foster Collaboration & employee engagement	Employees help each other, feel more part of the company
IT	Keep IT department lean	No software developers needed, employees run with it
Administration	Centralize information	Everybody stays informed, admin staff saves time
Everybody	Build a social community	Employees work better together across distances