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The Dynamics of Business Communication: a Look at Social Media Use in the Workplace

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The Dynamics of Business Communication: A look at Social Media use in the Work Place

Lee Honors College Undergraduate Thesis

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Abstract

This paper reviews the use of social media in a work place setting. Reviews on the history of social media and definitions are initially made to prepare the reader for the language of the paper. The main section of the paper covers the advantages and disadvantages of social media use in the work place from the perspective of inside an organization using a private social media platform. Private social media platforms are referred to as enterprise social media. Enterprise social media has advantages and disadvantages when used for communication in team settings, for individual communication and learning, and for knowledge sharing that affects an entire business or organization. The use of enterprise social media and networking tools in the work place could be beneficial to an organization because of the enhanced communication among employees and teams. In addition, the chance to glean knowledge from individuals that can be recorded and stored could also be beneficial for organizations and its members. However, this method of communication and collaboration is not for all organizations because of the potential shortcomings to the use of such tools. Organizations should consider the not only the shortcomings, but also the cost and needs of their employees when deciding if enterprise social media is appropriate and beneficial to its operations.

Introduction

Methods of business communication have changed dramatically in the last few decades with the introduction of social media being its newest addition. Organizations have adopted and utilized this new tool in communications technology in order to further the means of their business. This includes using communications technology to connect employees all over the world. Its use can come with great advantages for teams, individuals, and the collective knowledge of an organization, but it can come with disadvantages as well. The purpose of this paper is to explain and outline ideas pertaining to the use of enterprise social media and then to discuss the findings.

Defining Important Terms

According to Kaplan & Heinen (2010), as cited in Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad (2013), social media is “a group of Internet-based technologies that allows users to easily create, edit, evaluate, and/or link to content or to other creators of content” (p. 38). For the use of this paper, the term enterprise social media will be used to indicate social media utilized in workplaces. Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield (2013) defines enterprise social media as a “web-based platform that allows workers to (1) communicate messages with specific coworkers or broadcast messages to everyone in the organizations; (2) explicitly indicate or implicitly reveal particular coworkers as communication partners; (3) post, edit, and sort text and files linked to themselves or others; and (4) view the messages, connections, text, and files communicated, posted, edited, and sorted by anyone else in the organization at any time of their choosing” (p. 2). In addition, the term social networking will be referred to on occasion. Social networking sites are defined “as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded

system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211) (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). It is important to note the differences between social media and social networking. According to Cohen (2009) and Stelzner (2009), as cited in Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour (2011), “social media can be called a strategy and an outlet for broadcasting, while social networking is a tool and a utility for connecting with others” (p. 83). Social Media can also be thought of as the “media which is primarily used to transmit or share information with a broad audience, which social networking is an act of engagement as people with common interests associate together and build relationships through a community” (Cohen, 2009; Hartshorn, 2010; Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011, p. 83). Therefore, social media is the system versus social networking which is the process of communicating (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011).

History of Social Media

The communication technology movement has been monumental to the way humans have interacted over the years. Each method of communication has enabled humans to become more connected and overcome distances. Each of these methods of communication has also affected how businesses have operated all over the world. Business is now conducted in real time with people separated by large distances and also in close proximity to each other. Social media and networking is increasing the connectivity of employees because of its integration into the existing mix of business communication methods utilized by organizations.

Social media started as a way for people with similar interests to get to know one another and interact. One of the earliest sites that could be considered social media was MUD or Multi-User Dungeon (the “D” could also stand for Dimension or Domain) and it was a place for those interested in role-playing games to interact with each other and chat (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011). More recently and more commonly known public social networking sites included Six Degrees.com (launched in 1997), Live Journal (launched in 1999), LinkedIn (launched in 2003), MySpace (launched 2003), Facebook (available to everyone in 2006), and Twitter (launched 2006) (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Other public social networking sites appeared all over the world as well. LunarStorm came out of Sweden and Cyworld out of Korea (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). These public sites were also used for business and business communities.

Through the use of social media, companies could leverage their images and brands to become more attractive to potential customers and employees (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011). In addition, social media allowed companies to communicate with current customers and stakeholders in order to receive feedback and better support customers as well as aid companies in being transparent with those same stakeholders in time of crisis (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011). Public social media has also been used to facilitate communication between employees and managers. Unfortunately, in some cases this caused problems. As we have seen with Facebook over the years, employees connected with co-workers and bosses not only blur the lines of private life with public life, but could also cause information leaks (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013).

To combat the problems of using public social networking sites for internal purposes, private social networking sites can be used by firms or organizations for exclusively internal communication purposes. The earliest examples of using private social media were implemented in the form of private wikis and internal blogs (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). Today, private sites have very similar features to those public sites as well as additional features that aid in the communication of employees like document sharing, chat windows, emails, discussions forums, and virtual meetings (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). Some notable examples of private (enterprise) social networking sites are IBM's Beehive and HP's Watercooler system (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). IBM's Beehive is an enterprise social media for the use IBM employees. The site allows for employees to develop profiles, search for other people, interact with other employees by commenting on content, share content such as photos, and even RSVP to events organized through the site (Lee & Xue, 2013). All of these tools are also offered by public sites. This paper primarily focuses on how enterprise social media and its networking tools affect the internal communication of an organization.

Advantages of Social Media Use

The following section reviews the advantages of using enterprise social media in the work environment. Such advantages include enhanced communication among teams, positive effects on individual employees and how they operate inside an organization, and better knowledge sharing and knowledge management for organizations as a whole.

Communication and Interaction between Team Members

Enterprise social media's main purpose is for creating the opportunity for people to interact on a wider scale, share ideas, and discuss them. It is this purpose that makes

enterprise social media an asset to organizations. Enterprise social media and social networking offer many advantages for businesses such as promoting communication between employees and also promoting communication between management and employees (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011). Enterprise social media offers multiple ways to interact with co-workers and bosses like instant messaging and video chats as well as document sharing. This advantage seems to be felt most keenly by those employees who work abroad from co-workers and bosses. These employees either work from a remote site of the business or are utilizing the ability to work from home via telecommuting. The use of social media platforms within an organization allows these employees to become more involved and more visible to their team (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013).

Whether the employees are at work with their team or away, enterprise social media helps teams to operate more effectively with tools used for collaboration but also provides information about a person that can be updated (Bennett, Owers, Pitt, & Tucker, 2010). For example, Humana, a health care benefits insurance company, uses its own enterprise social media to help employees network and share their knowledge and experience through the use of personal blogs. The use of personal blogs and the use of the site's search function can enable workers to search the blogs based on what expertise they need and connect with the blog's creator (Lee & Xue, 2013). This personal information helps employees identify possible experts in particular fields of information and network with them. This function can enable people to make connections, learn from one another, and help each other complete projects. Prior to this, it would have been more difficult to connect and meet workers outside of one's own business segment (Gibbs, Rozaidi, &

Eisenberg, 2013; Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013).

Effects on Individual Employees

According to studies performed by Professor Joe Nandhakumar at the Warwick Business School, employees possess an increased productivity (leading to increased satisfaction and decreased employee turnover) when using social networking tools (Bennett, Owers, Pitt, & Tucker, 2010; Warwick Business School, 2013). This is due in part from the ability to communicate with coworkers (Warwick Business School, 2013). However, the increased productivity and satisfaction are also due to the sense of control and organization of information employees find when using such tools (Warwick Business School, 2013). Social media aids employees with information management partially by utilizing better content options that can include webcasts and other visual content (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011). Social media also gives an advantage because of how it concentrates information. According to Leonardi, Huysman, and Steinfield (2013), social media has the ability to record content and its comment and keep the lines of communication regarding a subject clear. This makes it easier to research a subject and learn from it because all the information is kept in one place and is tagged with the name of the creator and/or editor of the information so that they may be consulted (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013; Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013). In addition, enterprise social media helps connect workers who are not only abroad but also working together (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013). Enterprise social media and networking can help an employee feel more connected within an organization because of how it encourages employees to interact, discuss ideas, and become part of a community

and the culture in an organization (Huang, Baptista, & Galliers, 2012). This interaction leads to stronger network relationships and teams (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011; Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013).

Knowledge Sharing and Management

Knowledge sharing in an organization occurs not only within a team but throughout an entire organization. The knowledge sharing ability of social media is crucial for interaction in teams so that they can share project ideas and interact with higher management to share ideas and get feedback (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011). Knowledge sharing also means having conversations online and collectively conversing over the information presented in the enterprise social media platform. This can happen in both informal and formal means on the terms of the individual posting due to the decentralized nature of social media (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). These conversations are meant not only to come to a single understanding of the information but also to help improve upon it from the “collective intelligence” of those involved (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). These conversations, if performed with the right people, can hammer out not only the strengths and weaknesses about the information but also discuss the perceived value of the information (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). These online discussions and their fruits add to the overall knowledge of the organization (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). In addition, the ability of enterprise social media to keep information in a single space makes the information not only easy to find (information isn’t ever buried in emails), but also quickly gives a context for the information based on the tracked conversations behind it (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013).

Disadvantages to Social Media Usage

This section outlines the disadvantages associated with enterprise social media as it pertains to employees in a team setting, individual employees, and the action of knowledge sharing and management of that knowledge.

Communication and Interaction between Team Members

Unfortunately, enterprise social media does not always enhance the communication between employee team members. One part of this disadvantage stems from cultural differences and language barriers. Corporations operate all over the world and, therefore, have diverse employee demographics. Enterprise social media does not aid teams where large language and cultural barriers are an issue (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). Another part of this disadvantage stems from the increased openness of communication among team members. The openness of communication in teams may lead its members to feel like they are lurking around each other (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013). In addition, teams using enterprise social media tools, like forums and discussion pages, could find that large differences or too many differences in views could arise from online discussions. This openness and visibility could create tensions between the employees (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013).

Effects on Individual Employees

Like many things that happen at work, enterprise social media usage can act as a distraction to an employee and can decrease his or her productivity (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). This constant connectivity and barrage of questions from other employees can lead to an increased difficulty in balancing work items (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). In addition, many researchers are concerned that the use of

enterprise social media will break down traditional communication methods and traditional social interactions and blur the lines between the traditional work environment and the virtual work environment (Bennett, Owers, Pitt, & Tucker, 2010). With the use of enterprise social media, the traditional communication methods, like body language, are lost when communicating through virtual means (Bennett, Owers, Pitt, & Tucker, 2010). Another detrimental effect to using enterprise social media stems from having a presence in social networking and displaying personal information. Employees may decide to only present certain information on important subjects in order to “retain their expertise and not weaken their position” inside the company (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013, p. 113).

Knowledge Sharing and Management

The ability for social media to connect large amounts of people to information and the ability for those people to comment, edit, and create that information can also create problems. A group of people working on certain content could lead to biases like group think (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). Group think is the instance of filtering out viewpoints that challenge the current view of the group; so no one plays devil’s advocate (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). With biases present, accuracy and quality of the information being created or discussed are never challenged or questioned so the information never improves (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013).

Another disadvantage to enterprise social media platforms is the questionable credibility of the information. Originally, information created had to go through what was known as gate keeping. Gate keeping is the function of deciding what information is shared with the public (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). This function was taken on by journalists, owners of the information, and editors, and it was those people who had the

responsibility to verify the truth of the information presented (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). In current times, the notion of gate keeping is obsolete because any individual with access to the Internet can create and share information online, whether true or not (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). The function needed now is for the consumer of the information to act as a “gate watcher,” meaning that the consumers themselves have to determine the credibility of the information they use (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). Such consumers of information who are inside the business have the potential to glean large quantities of information from the collective knowledge of an organization. A potential disadvantage to having such open information is that those who use the information do not contribute to the conversation (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). The collective knowledge used by an organization and its people has to be contributed to in order for it to improve over time. Less organizational knowledge over time could lead to less information for future employees, less of a chance to learn from mistakes, and less of a chance for the organization to leverage the information of those who know part of the business best (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013). However, some employees might not be compelled to participate in the organizational knowledge because they feel that management is watching (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013) (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). This non-participation can arise from trust issues, a sense of privacy invasion, or from a sense of micromanagement (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013).

The use of social media has also been discredited for business use due to the channels being “leaky pipes” (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). This indicates that information can be seen by others outside of the organization or outside of the

conversation taking place and could lead to a loss of sensitive information (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013).

Discussion

It is evident from the research presented in this paper that the use of enterprise social media is a double edged sword. For a business, enterprise social media could mean better ways to communicate the corporate culture and policies, to monitor the talent of their employees, increase channels communication and feedback to employees from management, and leverage the collective knowledge of the organization (Huang, Baptista, & Galliers, 2012; Lee & Xue, 2013). On the other hand, if not properly implement or monitored, social media and social networking could hinder more than help in the communication and collaboration of employees.

It is important to consider the advantages and disadvantages listed above, but also to develop a code of governance to help employees understand how social media should be used (Vaast & Kaganer, 2013). The code of governance should be discussed by top management to determine if strict control or looser control is better for their organization (Huang, Baptista, & Galliers, 2012). Cost should also be considered in implementing a social media platform. Free and public sites would not cost anything to implement and most likely would not require training for employees, but they could mean an increase in information being leaked to the public. It would also mean that the site would not be controlled by company (Maultasch de Oliveira & Watson-Manheim, 2013) (Vaast & Kaganer, 2013).

On the other hand, internally developed sites and third party private sites would cost the organization resources (money, time, talent, etc.) and may require training for their employees. However, the site would be completely controlled by the organization

(Vaast & Kaganer, 2013). In addition, the demographics of a company's employee group should be considered, specifically which generation an employee belongs to. Employees belonging to the Millennial generation and Generation X, which are both comprised of tech savvy employees, already use social media and will be quick to use it at work (Ferri-Reed, 2013). On the other hand, Baby Boomers might not be as willing to use social media at work and would opt for other means of communication or face-to-face meetings (Ferri-Reed, 2013). For workers that are not already acquainted with social media, a steep learning curve and resistance to change could be a problem and management should ensure that social media is good fit for the culture of their organization before implementation (Cyphert, Wurtz, & Duclos, 2013).

Conclusion

The analysis of the above provided information has led me to conclude that social media use for the action of social networking internal to an organization has an overall positive effect on employees, teams, and the organization itself. The increased ability to communicate and gather knowledge will be beneficial to organizations in the long run. Granted, the usage, cost, and fit with an organization should be analyzed. Only public social media sites are inherently free and the trade offs of using public sites versus privately developed (and more expensive) platforms should be considered. In addition, how often the platforms would be used and for what should be analyzed to determine the cost tradeoffs mentioned before as well as how well using the social media platforms will fit with the culture of the organization. Such platforms may be more useful for an international corporation than it would a family owned shop in terms of internal communication and knowledge sharing amongst employees.

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