Knowledge Management and Enterprise Social Networking
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How Does social networking Affect Our Workplaces?

Introduction

This account of the Global Mobility Network’s exploration of ‘Knowledge Management and Enterprise Social Networking’ is a first-cut attempt at identifying how enterprise social networking might facilitate knowledge management. On reflection, the topic is ambitious. Knowledge Management is itself a debated concept and social networking, particularly in the enterprise, is surrounded by hype and lack of clarity. The first task is therefore to propose meanings of terminology, taking clues from literature and blogs, before summarising input from the keynote presentations and the analysing the groups’ discussions on the questions:

- What is Enterprise Social Networking?
- What are the key drivers, enablers and barriers to Enterprise Social Networking in a knowledge management context?

Terminology

Social Computing

According to Forrester, social computing is

“social structure in which technology puts power in communities, not institutions”

Consumer power is wreaking significant structural change in entire industries (traditional broadcasting and music), and changing how businesses communicate with consumers. User-generated content, often captured and distributed on mobile digital devices at the point of inspiration, is a key way in which communities are created typically through social networking sites and blogs.

People are adopting social computing technologies on their own terms, with no permission or direction and for their own purposes.

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Social Networking

The Wikipedia definition of a social network\(^2\) is,

> a social structure made of nodes (which are generally individuals or organizations) that are tied by one or more specific types of interdependency”. Patterns arising from links among nodes within social networks can be analysed through Social Network Analysis.

Social Networking Sites

Social networks can exist and function independently of technology, in which case they tend to be hidden and function out of sight. Social networking websites make visible the networks of connections among people that are usually hidden in the real world\(^3\).

Social networking sites vary in the facilities they provide but usually include personal profiles, comments and private messaging. They might additionally provide photo and video sharing, and built-in blogging\(^4\).

Social networking sites could be considered a subset of social computing, and the same observations apply that people participate on their own terms, with no permission or direction and for their own purposes.

Some social networking sites, LinkedIn and Xing for example, are business-focused and specifically link people in a business context. Other social networking sites like Facebook can be used for businesses purposes, with closed communities being created within Facebook for exclusive use of corporate members.

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\(^2\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_network  
\(^3\) http://www.commoncraft.com/video-social-networking  
\(^4\) http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html  
\(^11\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_network  
\(^12\) http://discovermagazine.com/videos/interview-danah-boyd/  
\(^13\) http://www-306.ibm.com/software/lotus/news/social_software.html#benefits  
\(^15\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panopticon  
\(^17\) Lowell, L et al. (2007). Harnessing the Power of Informal Employee Networks, The McKinsey Quarterly, No. 4
*Enterprise Social Computing*

Enterprise social computing is set to be adopted as an umbrella term for a newly emerging generation of business systems. Charles Armstrong, CEO of Trampoline Systems, is the person making the prediction. His company is responsible for one of these new generation technologies and approaches technology development from a social and ethnographic starting point.

The focus on social dynamics and ethnography is consistent with the Forrester definition of social computing. Unlike social computing, enterprise social computing technologies are deployed for business objectives and used in compliance with a company’s strategic aims, policies and procedures.

*Enterprise Social Networking*

Enterprise social networking appears to refer to social networking sites designed for the enterprise, which emulate much of the functionality of social networking sites.

For IBM’s enterprise social networking offering, this means profiles as a core component, blogging, bookmarking, and the creation of self-defined and self-managed online communities. For Microsoft, planned features are expertise search, blogs, RSS feeds, and profiles within the company’s SharePoint platform. Tools designed to let users create community websites, personal websites, wikis and mash-ups to foster collaboration are also specified as part of a raft of functionality.

*Enterprise 2.0 and Web 2.0*

Terminology around networking and collaboration tools within and across the enterprise is emergent and therefore confusing. For example, Andrew McAfee at Harvard University is credited with coining the term Enterprise 2.0, translated in a recent KPMG report as,

> the use of an entire suite of emergent technologies—wikis, blogs, tagging, and social networking tools—both within and beyond the four walls of an enterprise.

The KPMG report has a very useful table of these emergent technologies, along with names of platform providers, and names of businesses that are using the technologies.

McAfee’s Enterprise 2.0 conceptualisation is inspired by Tim O’Reilly’s original use of the term Web 2.0. McAfee and O’Reilly continue to refine their definitions, and one of O’Reilly’s revisions is,

> Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them. (This is what I’ve elsewhere called "harnessing collective intelligence.")
Keynote Presentations

Adrian is VP Sales for Trampoline Systems, which produces systems that allow businesses to identify, monitor, measure and manage social networks, information flows and expertise. As information from a range of sources (including email, IM, wiki, blog, RSS, documents etc.) passes through the company’s SONAR technology, it extracts connections and key themes. The technology then uses these to create social graphs, and information flows across the organization are presented as tag clouds.

Rather than speak about the software, Adrian discussed drivers underlying the need to understand and influence organisational network structures and dynamics, and to create support systems and processes that facilitate collaboration throughout increasingly dispersed organisational structures.

Choosing just one of these external drivers, he highlighted innovation and presented evidence that the main sources of innovation and new thinking within organisations are employees, business partners and clients. Surfacing connections among these people through enterprise social computing and supporting management systems enables businesses to manage knowledge effectively, harnessing and supporting collaboration and knowledge-sharing capability.

As well as identifying where innovation occurs, enterprise social computing enables businesses to find talent, identify expertise and make communication more efficient. Adrian concluded by saying that connecting people to people in networks that exhibit trust and commitment requires a mix of technology, people factors, organisational commitment and employee support.
Professor Colin Coulson-Thomas is Chairman of Cotoco. The company captures what top performers do and builds performance differentiators into software tools for others to learn from. Colin presented findings from research in over 4,000 companies into the characteristics of winning people in winning companies.

Colin made several strong observations in his keynote talk. He began by saying that if he had fallen asleep for twenty years and had just awoke, he would not know that he had been asleep. Although communication technologies have the capability to transform organisational structures and working practices, and to support performance gains, the behaviours, attitudes and skills (or lack of) that prevent and enable high-performance remain the same.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determine</td>
<td>Determine what knowledge is required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create</td>
<td>Create a learning strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manage</td>
<td>Manage the learning created</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exploit</td>
<td>Create knowledge entrepreneurs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apply</td>
<td>Develop job support tools</td>
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</table>

The knowledge management agenda outlined in the table is defined from the research.

Colin stressed that technology is neutral, and new technological applications within knowledge work can only influence productivity and how people do their jobs if there is exposure to change, recognition of the need to change, and acceptance and commitment to change. Winning companies create and deploy new technologies to exploit what they already have.

He finished by saying that many companies spend a fortune on sharing what everyone already knows, putting enormous effort into things that do not make a difference. Winning companies know that the best place to start is not with the ‘walking overheads’ but to make it easy for the high-performers to get hold of the tools and support they need to do their jobs. They also know how to capture knowledge of what makes high-performers effective and then create simple, scalable and cost effective support tools to transfer.
success capabilities to other people.

Don is CEO of Cotoco. He gave an example of one of his company’s job support tools, which integrate the principles uncovered in the research programme. Don provided evidence from the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) indicating that on-the-job-training is regarded as the most effective form of learning.

Applying the tool improved the performance of sales staff in one company by reducing the cost of technical support, increasing sales by 25% and over a reduced length of the sales cycle. Direct benefits of £3m accrued to the company within a year.

Key lessons in implementing job support tools include keeping it simple, and then using tools to improve processes and sharing good practice. The tools are most cost-effective with homogenous groups/tasks, and when focused on applications with the greatest impact.

**Discussion Groups**

The executives present at the meeting were allocated to four groups to consider,

- What is Enterprise Social Networking?
- What are the key drivers, enablers and barriers to Enterprise Social Networking in a knowledge management context?

**What is Enterprise Social Networking?**

Feedback from one of the groups suggested that terminology needed to be further explored. When we did this, we found widely quoted definitions of Web 2.0 and Enterprise 2.0, both of which focused on the characteristics that technologies should demonstrate to be able to harness collective intelligence.

Both the wikipedia definition of a social network, and Forrester’s definition of social computing put people, their relationships and communities at the core of their definitions:

Social computing - “a social structure in which technology puts power in communities, not institutions”\(^\text{10}\).

Social network - “a social structure made of nodes (which are generally individuals or organizations) that are tied by one or more specific types of interdependency”\(^\text{11}\).

The discussion groups defined enterprise social networking in terms of loosely coupled, self-organising, democratic and trusted informal communities, which reach across the formal structure of an organisation and supply chain, to collaborate, generate value, ideas, share knowledge, talent and wisdom.
Members’ written contributions and keywords are collated in the appendix. Synthesising the Web 2.0 and Enterprise 2.0 definitions with the network members’ definitions, enterprise social networking might therefore be seen as:

“dynamic, loosely-coupled, self-organised informal communities reaching and sharing knowledge across the formal structure of an organisation and supply chain, enabled by technologies and organisational structures, policies and processes that harness collective intelligence for effectiveness and competitive advantage”

KM Enabling Technologies

Informal social networks have always existed in organisations but remained largely hidden. The emergence of social networking technologies now offers the possibility of making informal networks visible.

There are two different, and complementary, ways of making hidden links visible: social network analysis tools, and enterprise social networking technologies.

Enterprise social computing tools, exemplified by the Trampoline Systems SONAR technology which monitors and extracts connections and information flows across the organisation, is used by management to gather and analyse management information. These technologies are components of formal management systems used to track and control information. They can identify who the effective networkers and high-performers are; surfacing and tracking their connections and enabling businesses to pin-point where the knowledge is and develop easy-to-use tools to support the high-performers in their work, allowing their knowledge to be captured and transferred to others.

Enterprise social networking tools on the other hand are aimed at connecting employees and emulate much of the functionality of online social networking sites. Danah Boyd, an ethnographer of digital culture, says that social networking sites have three core properties:

(1) profiles, which can be seen as a ‘digital body’ where people write about themselves – ‘writing yourself into being’

(2) friends, who comprise an imagined audience and a self-defined social group

(3) comment structures that allow public interactions, and where relationships with others are displayed.
Enterprise social networking tools offer community and collaboration features like profiles as a core component, blogging, bookmarking, RSS, wikis, and the creation of self-defined, self-managed online communities\textsuperscript{13}. There are four different ways enterprise social networking technologies might be approached:

- **individuals participating in business-focused social networks**, like Xing or LinkedIn, or even Facebook for business purposes, for their own satisfaction. They might network with work colleagues or people outside their organisation’s sphere of influence. While this is not strictly enterprise social networking, it is one way in which high-performers can find new knowledge and then feed it back into their own organisation. In which case, a business could use a social computing tool like SONAR to track the resulting connections, information and knowledge flows.

- **businesses supporting a corporate presence on public social networks** like Facebook. We know that some businesses are using Facebook as a social networking portal linked to their management and technology systems behind the enterprise firewall.

- **businesses providing closed enterprise social networking sites restricted to authorised people** i.e. staff, partner companies or ex-employees. We do not know much about the extent of the dissemination, or success or otherwise of enterprise social networking sites.

- **knowledge management** is more commonly associated with communication and collaborative technologies, like blogs, wikis, RSS, discussion forums, which tend to be regarded within an overall suite of tools that harness collective intelligence. These are perceived as being far more purposeful tools than social networking, around which there is unease and fears about time-wasting.

**Issues Arising**

It is interesting to note that the discussion groups' definitions of enterprise social networking stressed informal networks and communities as the source of knowledge creation and exchange.

Informal networks have long been recognised as sources of creativity (and negativity). Since they are informal, they are difficult to manage and because they 'typically fly under management’s radar, they elude control'. A recent McKinsey article promotes the view that 'the greatest limitation of these ad hoc arrangements (informal networks) is that they can’t be managed'\textsuperscript{14}.

Communities of social networks outside of enterprise control, which people have been joining in large numbers, are self-determining. Informal enterprise networks share the same self-determining characteristics but are subject to attempts to control them by formal management technologies and systems. This tensions between free-agent behaviour and organisational constraints are represented in the diagram.
We know the dangers of over-zealous operational and social control from decades of lean manufacturing research. In their attempts to monitor, control and formalise, there is a real possibility of businesses alienating the spontaneous sharing of passion and interests for self-esteem, fun and need for social connectivity which our executives identified as drivers of enterprise social networking. Moreover, the constant monitoring of communications and interactions, in the manner of Bentham’s Panopicon\textsuperscript{15}, is not without ethical considerations.

Much depends on the way formalisation and monitoring is actioned - by whom, how people are consulted and the use to which the information is put\textsuperscript{16}. Creative collaboration will be the result of a careful balance of the interplay between formalised systems and informal networking dynamics. This is far from simple.

**Final Thoughts**

Referring back to the keynote speakers and managing knowledge, there was convergence in both speakers’ focus on the business imperative of understanding who the high-performers are, understanding where value is created and who creates it, and understanding the roles key people play in sourcing and acting on new, value-creating knowledge. Both speakers supported the view that critical success factors could be determined and built into process and support tools.

Knowledge management is increasingly viewed as old thinking, focused on content and databases. Additionally, many people believe that knowledge cannot be managed. With the emergence of Web 2.0 / Enterprise 2.0 technologies, knowledge management as a concept is being re-energised through people connecting, creating and distributing user generated content via informal networks and communities.

What can be managed is the environment where collaborative learning happens. Knowledge management is therefore not a question of content or collaboration. It is about content, for example in the form of tools derived from information captured on the habits of high-performers or information about connections and key themes. It is also about setting the organisational conditions that will encourage trusted relationships, conversations, facilitate action, enhance thinking and promote knowledge sharing.

We need to understand more about what these conditions might be, their common features and how they might differ for different groups of people, sectors and specific operating contexts, for example industries subject to...
regulatory compliance.

Businesses can choose to adopt different approaches to informal networks. One way is to attempt to formalise them, “building network infrastructures assigning ‘leaders to focus discussions and combining hierarchy and collaboration to bring together natural professional communities”\(^\text{17}\). Alternatively, they can apply a lighter touch approach, identifying and recognising the existence of informal networks, providing appropriate tools, support, rewards and incentives, and then clear out of the way to let them get on with it.

Euan Semple, recognised as a pioneer in using blogs, wikis and discussion forums for knowledge management and innovation in organisations, makes the point in this blog entry and subsequent conversation with readers\(^\text{1}\) that effort and time has to be devoted to deploying social media / collaboration tools to manage knowledge. People might be flocking to connect on social networking sites but much more effort, thought and support has to be given to applying similar tools within enterprises for business objectives, like managing knowledge.

**Appendix**

The discussion groups’ definitions of enterprise social networking were,

‘Informal communities reaching across the formal structure of an organisation and supply chain, generating value, ideas and community spirit.’

‘the enablement of loosely coupled, informal networks in order to promote the growth, knowledge sharing, knowledge management, and collaboration that drives effectiveness and competitive advantage.’

‘encapsulating your wider networks for trusted knowledge to add value and diversity to deliver.’

‘exchange of views or knowledge between individuals but available to a wider group.’

‘self-managing democratic community of common interests based on values and trust’

Additional keywords and phrases proposed include,

connected easily, for what purpose, guiding principles – the sharing of talent and wisdom, lack of hierarchy?, rewarding, social rather than sociable, easy, fun and valuable to do what I need to do.’
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