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Corporate Social Networks Effects on Perceived Organizational Support and Perceived Supervisor Support

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ABSTRACT

Increasing use of online social network sites by organizations and their growing tendencies to establish an intra-organizational social network necessitates academic attention as to how these social networks can affect organizational outcomes. To fill this gap by a margin, this paper will theorize and propose ways in which corporate social networks are able to affect the perceived organizational support and the perceived supervisor support among employees. The study proposes that organizational use of corporate social networks positively affect employees’ perceptions of supervisor support and organizational support. It also suggests that the use of corporate social networks would help employees to have better evaluation of social and organizational support.

Keywords
Corporate social networks, social support, organizational support, and supervisor support.

INTRODUCTION

The use of social network sites (SNS) has become an international phenomenon. Since their inception in the new millennium, they have become increasingly popular among internet users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily lives (Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Sledgianowski and Kulviwat, 2009). With their immense popularity among general internet users and the potential benefits they can have for organizations, it did not take long for companies to adopt or develop their own computerized social network in order to “harness the power of crowds” (Majchrzak, Cherbakov, and Ives, 2009). However, organizations’ widespread use of social networking tools has been largely neglected by academic research. Currently, results of online search of Business Search Premier and ABI/Inform databases show only a few related articles in academic journals which investigate knowledge diffusion and knowledge management benefits that these networks have for organizations (e.g. Zhang, Zhu, and Hildebrandt, 2009; Byosiere, Luethge, Vas, and Salmador, 2010). The lack of academic research leaves organizational science researchers with a wide range of topics to research. For example, research on how corporate social networks (CSN) may affect individual employees’ performance and satisfaction, or how they may affect organizational outcomes such as a learning and innovation. Such studies will be beneficial for both academic research and management practice.

In this respect, employees’ perceived organizational support, which is a part of social support aspect of a job, is suggested to hold a positive relationship with behavioral and attitudinal outcomes such as job performance, absenteeism, turnover intentions, organizational citizenship, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, motivation, etc (Humphrey, Nahrgang, and Morgeson, 2007; Morgeson and Humphrey 2006; Grant and Parker, 2009). According to Grant and Parker (2009) social support is the degree to which an organization provides opportunities for employees to be connected to each other in order to easily exchange suggestions and provide assistance. Furthermore, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) suggest that perceived organizational support is an important predictor for job motivation and performance through selected relational and emotional mechanisms, and they identify perceived supervisor support as the strongest antecedent of perceived organizational support. Given the importance and unique impact of social support in general and perceived organizational support specifically, on desirable work outcome, it will be both of theoretical and practical significance to investigate factors and technologies that could affect the level of perceived social support and its major antecedent among employees.

Computer mediated corporate social networks are considered as technologies that directly affect employees connectedness to each other and thus they are expected to influence socially dependent individual outcomes such as social and organizational support. This paper will investigate and propose potential effects of corporate social networks on employees’ perceived organizational support and perceived supervisor support.
In doing so, the paper will provide a brief review of social aspect of work and a history and review of social networks sites as well as corporate social networks. Next, it will introduce the arguments as to why and how corporate social networks would affect employees’ perception of organizational support in general and employees’ perception of supervisors support as the strongest predictor of organizational support. Finally, methodologies for empirically testing the validity of propositions are discussed and alternative approaches and ideas for future research are offered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Job Social Support

Social support is perceived as belief of being loved, valued, and cared for in community of friends or colleagues (Kirmeyer and Lin, 1987). In organizational context, social support is defined as the extent to which an employee receives assistance from other employees and his supervisors (Grant and Parker, 2009). This support can be in both emotional and instrumental forms. According to Grant and Parker (2009), work design scholars believe that social support greatly influence employees’ abilities and experiences to carry out their work. They categorize scholarly works on social support into four research stream: Demand-Control-Support model, the job Demands-Resources model, social undermining perspective, and organizational support theory.

Scholars using demand-control-support model are interested in investigating and explaining the negative effects of job demands on stress, strain, burnout, and physical illnesses. It is believe that job control, which is similar to autonomy in concept, would act as a buffer against negative job outcomes by helping employees to master their tasks and engage in a focused problem coping process (Karasek, 1979). Further, Karasek and Theorell (1990) and Bliese and Britt (2001) found that social support takes a similar role to that of job control to protect employees against harmful effects of job demands thus they added social support to the initial model and called it demand-control-support model. However, according to Grant and Parker (2009), research on buffering effect of social support is inconclusive. Some studies found support for the idea that social support reduces he negative psychological and physical health effects of job demands, others proposed a three-way interaction suggesting that social support is more likely to act as a buffer when job control is lacking and some others could not find any buffering effects for social support whatsoever.

The job-demand resources model look at the social support as a job resource and exerts that social support independently reduce disengagement and depersonalization instead of having a buffering effect against the negative outcomes of job demands on health. Research in this area suggests that social support facilitate goal achievement and personal growth as well. Therefore, it can enhance employees’ well-being by reducing disengagement and depersonalization as well as by enabling them to learn from experiences and helping them to accomplish their objectives (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

Social undermining perspective give a huge attention to the source of social support and it indicates that the source plays a critical role in shaping the associated effects. This perspective takes into account that it is possible to receive support at the same time as being undermined. Duffy, Ganster, and Pagon (2002) assert that if employees are undermined by one source, support from a different source would help them to cope with the negative impacts of undermining. However, Duffy et al. (2002) study, counterintuitively, suggests that if both support and undermining are coming from the same source, the negative impacts of undermining would be stronger.

According to Grant and Parker (2009), organizational support theory builds on social exchange theory and it suggests that employees are sensitive to evidences as to whether they are supported by the organization or not. As noted by Levinson (1965), employees often view actions taken by agents of organization as indications of organization’s intent rather than individual attribute of the agent. Thus, on the basis of personification, employees view agents’ favorable or unfavorable treatment as an indication that the organization favors or disfavors them. Employees tend to reciprocate organizations with stronger affective commitment, increased citizenship behavior, decreased withdrawal, and enhanced performance, if they perceive that the organization care about their contributions by providing favorable treatments to them (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Organizational fairness, supervisor support, and pro-employee organizational reward and job conditions program are seen as favorable actions by employees. However, these actions have to be perceived by employees as an act of kindness and care rather than an act of compliance and compulsion. This means that for an act to be seen favorable by employees it should not be mandate by authoritative figures. Among the three types of favorable actions that can be taken by organizations, support from supervisors and managers is believed by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) to be the best predictor of perceived organizational support among employees.
Computer Mediated Social Networks

Social network sites. Social network sites (SNS) are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, to accumulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and to view and navigate through their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007). The nature and classification of these connections may vary from site to site (Boyd and Ellison, 2008).

What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers or to connect to an acquaintance by means of computers, but that they enable users to articulate and visualize their social networks. According to Haythornthwaite (2005), this can result in connections between individuals that would not otherwise be connected. These individuals usually share some degrees of offline connection. Boyd and Ellison (2008) assert that on many of the large SNSs, participants are not necessarily networking in order to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network.

Social network sites employ a wide variety of technical features to differentiate themselves from their competitors but what they all have in common is a visible profile for each user and a list of friends or connections who are also users of the system. Profiles are usually unique personal pages which are the representative of a personal existence in that social network (Sunden, 2003). Typically, individual create their profiles on SNSs at the time that they sign up for a service with the SNS. At this time, they are required to answer some personal questions which typically include descriptors such as age, location, interests, and a general description about the creator of the profile. Most SNSs also encourage their members to upload a photo for their profile. Some sites let users to enhance their profiles by adding multimedia content or personalizing the look and color of their profile. The most popular SNS today, Facebook, allows users to add different application modules to enhance their online social networking experience. Many SNSs also provide users with sophisticated privacy setting in order to enable the users to control what part of their information is accessible to the general public or other SNS users (Boyd and Ellison, 2008).

Social network sites have been the subject of many academic researches. Because of their popularity among internet users, scholars from different fields have studied these sites through their professional lenses. Sledgianowski and Kulviwat (2009) study on intentions to use SNS found that a person’s intention to use a social network site is significantly affected by his perceptions of playfulness, critical mass of other users, normative pressure, trust toward the service, website usefulness, and ease of use. Donath and Boyd (2004) suggest that public displays of connections serve as important identity signals in social network sites, in that an extended network may serve to validate identity information presented in profiles. Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2007) explored the relationship between profile elements and number of Facebook friends and found profile fields that reduce transaction costs and are harder to falsify such as high school or college information, are most likely to be associated with larger number of friendship links. Research on privacy found that there is often a disconnect between users’ desire to protect privacy and the actions they take to protect it (Gross and Acquisti, 2005). Hodge (2006) studied the privacy issue on SNS from a legal perspective. He believes that current laws are not equipped to address social network sites. For example, whether law enforcement authorities have the right to access content posted on Facebook without a warrant? Finally, in an interesting study, Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2007) investigated how faculty membership in SNS affect student-instructor relations and found that high teacher self-disclosure on Facebook may lead students to higher levels of anticipated motivation and affective learning and lead to a more comfortable classroom climate.

Organizations and Social Networks. Two rather complementary perspectives have appeared in the literature for the organizational use of social networks. One considers how organizations can take advantage of the existing and public social network sites in order to promote their products and services, and gather feedback, for brand and impression management. Scholars of the other perspective, direct their attention to corporate social networks (CSN), which are organizational specific and designed to address specific organizational needs, and how CSN can affect organizational related outcomes and measures.

Benefits of Social Network Sites for organizations. Research in this area tries to realize how social network sites are affecting organizations and how they need to adjust and take advantage of these new technologies. Bernoff and Li (2008) explain that organizations need to accept the fact that customers have gained power by using social networking websites on the internet. Organizations need to quickly redefine their strategies in order to monitor and quickly respond to issues elaborated in the social network sites, so as to gain a competitive advantage and survive in this customer centric era. In this regard, Bernoff and Li illustrate some cases of advantageous use of social network sites by companies such as Dell, General Motors and
Fiskars Corporation, as well as cases in which companies such as Comcast and AOL, failed due to lack of attention to this growing phenomena.

Research on marketing suggests that effects of word of mouth marketing is more notable when social network sites are used compared with traditional means of marketing because on SNSs users actually can track back a word of mouth to its source and form a better judgment (Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels, 2009). Casteleyn, Mottart, and Rutten (2009), discuss possible ways to use social network sites to recognize market trends and customers intentions for market forecasts and planning. In addition, Poynter (2008) explains how organizations can use Facebook to network with their current customers and find new ones.

Waters, Burnett, Lamm, and Lucas (2009) believe that non-profit organizations are not representing themselves on social network sites as their for profit counterpart organizations do, and discuss the ways that non-profit organizations can enhance their presence on social network sites in order to better attract volunteers and improve their fundraising activities.

With regard to the application of SNSs for human resources managers, Ross (2005) discusses how organizations can take advantage of weblog community networks to identify new hires. In addition, Kluemper and Rosen (2009) believe that available personal information on SNSs should be used in the hiring process and found that it is possible with an acceptable degree of reliability to distinguish good performers from bad performers relying only on information acquired from SNSs.

**Corporate social networks.** Computer based social networks in organizations refer to network systems that are based on real-time technology and enable quick and immediate update of activity at a level that is virtually trivial. These activities give all employees an opportunity to express themselves, to relate to the activities relevant to them, and to immediately translate their professional language into everyday activity in the organization as well as providing both professional and emotional support to other employees (Hasgall and Shoham, 2007).

Majchrzak et al., (2009) conducted a case study on the IBM social networking application. They explain that IBM pursued the use of social networking tools for several reasons. A main reason was that the company needed to keep its large body of members with more than 380,000 employees which were coming from different background and generations, connected. First generation of employees included senior members who were comfortable connecting with others through email. Mid-career workers were comfortable using instant messaging for communication and connecting to others. And the newbies were not only familiar with social networking tools, but also expected IBM to let them use these tools to connect to others. Another reason and perhaps the most important one for IBM to start using social networking application was that innovation through collaboration is a key strategy for organization and IBM believes that social networking tools facilitate mass collaboration across time, distance, function, and interests.

According to Majchrzak et al. (2009) employees at IBM used social networking tools for several reasons: to find an expert or interested user in an area of inquiry, to develop and discuss innovative ideas, to reach out to colleagues that they have not personally met, to humanize the workplace, to advance their career within IBM, and to promote their projects.

Even though there are numerous articles on corporate social networks published in practitioner journals, academic research on intra-organizational network sites is very scarce and yet to be flourished. To the author’s knowledge there has not been any structured and rigorous academic research on aspects of corporate social networks and how they can influence organizational related outcomes.

**PROPOSITION DEVELOPMENT**

A brief review of literature revealed many aspects of social characteristics of a job. However, this paper only focuses on the effects of corporate social networks as it relates to social support, specifically perceived organizational support and perceived supervisors support. Corporate social networks are theoretically confined in the physical and conceptual boundaries of organizations; therefore, it is rational to assume that they have a moderating effect on the employees’ interaction outside the organization. However, it is not possible to assume a direct link between the CSN and these outside interactions. Possible moderating effects of CSN on outside interactions and its related outcomes are briefly discussed in the discussion section. In the case of task interdependency and interpersonal feedback, it is also possible to theorize CSN as communication facilitator. Nevertheless, these effects are not in the interest of this paper and they are briefly discussed in the last section of the paper.
Social Networks and Employees’ Perception of Organizational Support

Social support is meaningless without taking into account the effects of elements of a social environment. However, many studies on perceived organizational and social support implicitly assume that employees independently observe and interpret treatments offered by organizations. As a result, social support research only provides individual level explanations for employees’ perception of organizational treatments. Yet social exchange relationships require that employees collect and interpret large amounts of information, most of which is only available through interactions with other organizational members (Zagenczyk, Scott, Gibney, Murrell, and Thatcher, 2010).

According to Ibarra and Andrews (1993), social network ties are considered to be a medium through which social influence occurs in organizations because these ties provide opportunities for employees to understand what others think, feel, say and do about organizational events. Burt (1987) believe that employees who are structurally equivalent tend to have similar perceptions and beliefs because at many times they see each other as comparable or substitutes for one another and occasionally the may see each other as competitors. In this regards, Zagenczyk et al. (2010) find that employees tend to have similar perception of organizational support to others who occupy similar positions as them.

Social networking tools are believed to increase the individual’s network size and facilitate communication among network members (Acar, 2008). Thus, if such tools are utilized in an organization to improve organizational communication, or for other organizational purposes, they will connect more employees to each other. Therefore, each employee will be connected to more employees with similar ranks and positions, given that the organization is large enough to allow such occurrence. According to Zagenczyk et al. (2010) the more employees socialize and exchange views and suggestions with each other the more they are likely to be homogenous in their perception toward the organization. With regard to the fact that social networking tools facilitate the flow of information among network members and provide them with more points of contact it is possible to assume that corporate social networking tools will help in homogenization of employees’ perceptions of the organizational support.

Proposition 1: Employees’ perception of social support vary less in organizations with corporate social networks than in organizations with no corporate social networks.

Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) assert that for an action taken by the organization or an organizational agent to be perceived as supportive, that action should be seen by employees as an act of kindness and attention rather than a compulsory act mandated by local, state, or federal regulations or an action taken in order to stay competitive in the labor market with other similar organizations. Hence, it is possible for an employee or group of employees to be under a wrong or biased impression of organization support if they are not well informed about either regulations or the market. Thus, if the flow of information among employees is inefficient, it is possible for employees to either under perceive or over perceive social support provided by organizations. Consequently, computerized social networks are suggested to facilitate data flow and increase the network size (Acar, 2008). In an organization with an operational social networking application, there are more points of contacts in a network and employees are more connected to each other through corporate social networks. Therefore, hypothetically, there are more data sources within the network to communicate information related to organizational support to others. Thus employees would base their evaluation of organizational support and their perception on more data points. Majchrzak et al. (2009) describe this process as forming the collective wisdom of the crowd through social networking tools. Hence it is expected that employees’ perception would be more reflective of the objective support provided by the organization.

Proposition 2: Employees’ perception of organizational support would be more reflective of objective support in organizations with corporate social networks than in organizations with no corporate social networks.

Social Networks and Employees’ Perception of Supervisor’s Support

Supervisor support is suggested to be the strongest predictor of organizational support, (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, and Rhoades, 2002). Because supervisors act as agents of the organization, employees would view their supervisor’s favorable or unfavorable treatments toward them as an indicator of organizational support (Levinson, 1965). Thus, it is possible to assume that employees who perceive their supervisor’s support more positively, will have greater levels of organizational support perception. Further, Eisenberger et al. (2002) assert that the higher the rank and status of a supervisor, the stronger the association between perceived supervisor support and perceived organizational support.
Using corporate social networks can eliminate the barrier between levels of management and organizational status by making a connection easy to establish. For example, through social networking tools employees are now able to not only connect to their direct supervisor, but also they can connect to higher levels of management. Further, Majchrzak et al. (2009) believe that many employees use corporate social networks to connect to those they do not know personally and to advance their career. Thus, it is logical to imagine that social network would enable higher level management to provide social support to lower level employees in addition to their direct reports. Also, it is possible to assume that lower level employees are now able to connect to higher level managers through social networking tools to seek advice and support. In addition to bridging connections, social networks can facilitate the direct support process as well by providing supervisors a new means to connect to their employees and support them both professionally and emotionally. The professional support occurs through engaging in discussions related to workplace and specific projects and emotional support transpires through publicly appraising employees on the corporate social network environment. Thus, corporate social networks are genuinely capable of facilitating the connection between employees and their direct and indirect supervisors which should lead to greater perception of supervisor support in employees which in turn leads to stronger perceptions of organizational support in them.

**Proposition 3:** Employees’ perception of supervisor’s support would be greater in the presence of corporate social networks than in its absence

**Proposition 4:** Employees’ perception of organizational support would be greater in the presence of corporate social networks than in its absence

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Everyday more and more organizations are adopting and using corporate social networks. This paper was the first step in investigating this ever growing phenomenon in organizations and its impact on social aspect of the job. It specifically addressed how corporate social networks can possibly affect one important aspect of the job which is related to many organizational outcomes. Perceived organizational support is believed to be related to and yet distinct from organizational commitment, effort reward expectancies, continuance commitment, perceived organizational politics, procedural justice, withdrawal behaviors, turnover intentions and most importantly job satisfaction and performance (Eisenberger et al. 1997, Eisenberger et al. 1986; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Eisenberger et al. 2002). This article argued that CSN would homogenize the perception of organizational support among employees by expanding their networks and making them exposed to other coworkers’ opinions about the organizational support thus decreasing the variation of perceived organizational support based on the social influence theory (e.g. Burt, 1987). The article also argued that CSNs are able to help employees to form a more objective perception of organizational support through having more information sources to form their judgment than ever before. Furthermore, CSNs can enhance perceived supervisors support by providing upper management more means to connect to their employees and thus increase perceived organizational support since perceived supervisor support is found to be the strongest predictor of perceived organizational support (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002).

Out of many social characteristics of a job defined by Morgeson and Humphrey (2006) only social support, and in that only perceived organizational support, and its strongest predictor, perceived supervisors support was addressed in this article because (1) intuitively it was appealing, since corporate social networks are designed in the first place to enhance social connection among employees (Hasgall and Shoham, 2007) and (2) according to Grand and Parker (2009) they are the most researched and least controversial aspect of a job social characteristics. However, other aspects of job social characteristics such as task interdependence, and interpersonal feedback demand equal attention from academic research. It is possible to assume CSNs are able to enhance feedback providing mechanism by providing a new way to deliver the feedback, which is essentially more socially transparent than traditional ways. One possible future research can be on how to use CSN to increase the effectiveness of interpersonal feedback. Moreover, because CSNs at their core would enhance social connectivity among employees they are expected to affect task interdependence through affecting the flow of information among interdependent employees and their tasks. Academic research is needed to determine whether CSNs can facilitate team cohesion, communication and in turn team performance. Moreover, corporate social networks may moderate the relationship between employees outside interactions and burnout by providing employees an extra means to receive organizational support from their coworkers by sharing stories with their connections on CSN and utilizing their connections as a support group. Finally, in order to be able to successfully test the proposed hypothesis we need to define a clear empirical line between organizations with CSN and those without CSN from a user perspective.
At the end the author hopes that this article serves as a stepping stone for the research on effects of corporate social networks on many other organizational and individual outcomes such as perceived fairness, turnover intentions, organizational commitment and citizenship behavior, innovation, etc.

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