Social Media in the Workplace: Key Drivers for Inclusive Innovation

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Social Media in the Workplace:
Key Drivers for Inclusive Innovation

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ABSTRACT
The recent decade has witnessed a mass proliferation of information systems enabled, community-based, social networking. Such proliferation has contributed to seismic social and political movements around the globe, but is yet to make a noticeable imprint in business organisations. While many researchers and practitioners have advocated the transition of social media to the organisational sphere, the actuality of this transition is still deficient, necessitating thorough investigation. Consequently, this study addresses this pressing issue by first, presenting a vantage point on the theoretical and practical underpinnings of social media and the revolutionising role they stand to play in organisations. An empirical case study is then presented highlighting the actual diffusion and utilisation of social media in a regional branch of a global consultancy and audit firm. The findings hold important implications as they identify key drivers contributing to the successful diffusion of social media in organisations, and their corresponding utilisation for enabling an inclusive and innovative environment in the workplace.

Keywords
Collaboration, Diffusion and Utilisation, Inclusive Environment, Innovation, Social Media, Workplace

INTRODUCTION
Through successful implementation and utilisation of social media in the workplace, organisations could unleash an unprecedented potential to innovate and adapt to their environment (Culnan et al. 2010). The recent achievements and momentum witnessed in the social and political arenas present promising examples of the potential that social media could play in business organisations. Nonetheless, the premise of ‘build and control’ seems to be firmly entrenched in the business psyche. Such premise has been traditionally based on a top-down vision of devising a competitive strategy and imposing management and control mechanisms on subordinates to implement such strategy. In this pursuit, the mechanical metaphor of organisations (Morgan 2006) has played a major role in organisational success over the centuries. Much like the different components of an engine, the effectiveness and efficiency of each, is essential for achieving the intended objective. Notwithstanding its success, the metaphor presents several limitations, not least of which manifests in the essential specialisation and dedication of each component to a specific task with little or no access to the larger reality of the organisation and the holistic environment in which it operates. This was due to the fact that information flows were restricted to command and control structures with limited information by-passing such flows. Over the past two decades however, the world has witnessed an information revolution allowing for multidimensional information flows. In such context, many organisations are still unaware or unwilling to exploit the benefits presented by the new information rich environment, which requires a transition to an ‘organic’ modus operandi. An organisation here emulates an organism in an eco-system (Morgan 2006), constantly interacting with its environment, constantly learning, constantly evolving. This favours a web-of-inclusion (Helgesen 2005) approach to organizational management, where awareness, interaction, and innovation - enabled by information and communication technologies - are no longer restricted to senior management and top down structures, but are a core objective of all organisational actors. In particular, the diffusion of social media in the contemporary organisation is set to bridge the silos of knowledge and expertise restricted by organisational structures and departmental and geographical...
boundaries to herald the emergence of a learning organisation, greater than the sum of its parts. It’s about crowdsourcing, engagement, empowerment, recognition, ownership and transformation for learning and value creation.

This study examines the diffusion and utilisation of social media from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. The paper commences by reviewing pertinent literature in this field. It then presents a case study on the successful diffusion and utilisation of social media in an organisation. Success drivers are then discussed, followed by the contributions and significance of this study. The paper concludes with a review of limitations and suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media have been popularly used for building online communities and connecting people by providing common online spaces and functionality for people to interact with each other, for example via blogging, discussion groups, file sharing spaces, and chat rooms (Bennett et al. 2009). Research on social media has been conducted across several disciplines, including psychology and behavioural sciences, marketing, education, public relations, and more recently in IS. A dominant focus of extant IS research investigates how social media are used for mass communication and for transforming societies in the 21st century in both public and private settings. This includes, for example, the impact of Wikileaks on mass social and political change and the effectiveness of Facebook in connecting millions of people across the globe. Consequently, early studies on social media have generally focused on non-work oriented environments because of the popularity of social networking sites, particularly among young generations, for connecting friends and families, such as Facebook, Friendster, CyWorld and MySpace (e.g. Ellison et al. 2007). In addition, some researchers examined how to incorporate social media in learning and teaching of the classroom environment (e.g. Kaufer et al. 2011; Ryan et al. 2011).

New research trends seem to be emerging in IS where social media are construed as central agents for mobilising knowledge and enabling collaborative innovation (Zhang 2010). For instance, Yates and Paquette (2010) studied the adoption of social media and its prospect in replacing traditional knowledge sharing and collaborative models based on personal presence (e.g. face-to-face meetings) in the emergency management of the 2010 Haitian earthquake. More recent studies have also been conducted in the public sector on the use of social media as political tools in campaigning, public relations, and government transparency (e.g. Bennett et al. 2009; Bertot et al. 2010; Smith 2010).

While such research provided an important foundation for understanding the multifaceted roles that social media could play in society at large, the implications of social media on communication and collaboration in the work environment require further investigation. Recently, several multinational companies have adopted social media with an attempt to enhance communication and collaboration among employees within their organisations (Wu and Millen 2010). However, the implications of adopting social media in the workplace context are yet to be adequately examined (Bennett et al. 2009), with only a limited number of exploratory studies addressing this emerging area. For instance, a study by Wu and Millen (2010) analysed employee behaviour on a UK company-internal social network site to determine the interaction patterns among colleagues. They found that organisations hosting social media sites might benefit from obtaining more information about workplace relationships among employees. Nevertheless, while some researchers (e.g. Culnan et al. 2010) recognise the importance of introducing social networks into the organisational domain in order to further enhance work-based communication and strengthen employee relationships, it is unfortunate that the business advantages and benefits of social networking in the workplace are still very much underappreciated and undervalued by many organisations (Bennett et al. 2009). Others argue that existing networks can themselves hinder the implementation of social networking sites (Zhang 2010).

Given such limitation, and in aiming to better understand the implications of social media in the workplace, this study explores the use of social media in an organisational context, to discern how and why social media are used. This investigation presents a case study on a regional branch of a leading multinational consultancy firm that is a pioneer in adopting social media for work collaboration. It identifies challenges and success factors relating to the use of social media in the workplace context. The following section presents the philosophical perspective adopted in this study.

RESEARCH METHDOLOGY

Given the exploratory nature of this research, an interpretivist research perspective is adopted incorporating qualitative research methods for data collection and analysis. Interpretive research assumes that: “People create and associate their own subjective and intersubjective meaning as they interact with the world around them. [T]he intent is to understand the deeper
structure of a phenomenon to increase understanding of the phenomenon within cultural and contextual situations” (Trauth, 2001, p.6). Walsham (1993, pp.4-5) also asserts that “interpretive methods of research in IS are aimed at producing an understanding of the context of the information system, and the process whereby the information system influences and is influenced by the context.” This approach fits well with the purpose of this study as it aims to explore human thoughts and actions in a socio-organisational context, providing a deeper insight of why social media are adopted and used in organisations, or indeed for exploring any hindrances that may prevent or restrict this adoption. In such pursuit, a case study was identified, to represent a successful implementation and diffusion of social media in a workplace context. The authors came across the case serendipitously, through an ongoing connection with an industry partner. Anecdotally, the case seemed to present novel and innovative mechanisms for incorporating social media in an organisation, which the authors were compelled to investigate. Along with approval from the industry partner, the authors sought and attained ethics approval from their university (a mandatory approval for such empirical research) for collecting data, in order to ascertain that the research will not identify, or have any negative implications on the individuals who voluntarily chose to participate in the study. Once such approval was granted, in collaboration with the industry partner, an invitation email was sent to employees. The email included details of the project and its objectives, along with contact information for the researchers should any employee be interested in being interviewed. Several employees volunteered for the study. Another ‘snowballing’ data collection mechanism then emerged with employees recommending others for the study whom they thought would have a significant contribution to make due to their roles or involvement in social media. Empirical data from 10 interviews were collected in 2010. Given the offsite nature of the consultancy and audit work, it was challenging to find suitable time to meet for the interviews, but this was eventually accommodated to suit the interviewees and their time schedules. Along with the interview data, the interviewees often demonstrated the systems they used to the interviewers, which constituted a supplementary observation mechanism for data collection. The data were then transcribed, then coded and analysed with the assistance of QSR NVivo 9, a qualitative data analysis tool. The case study is presented next.

CASE STUDY

The organisation selected for the study is a regional branch of a leading multinational consultancy and audit firm with well over 100,000 staff globally. The organisation as a whole, and this regional branch in particular, have developed a reputation for being a leader in innovation. Given the nature of its work, many employees at the organisation spend considerable amounts of time at their clients’ sites conducting their consultancy and audit work. This has prompted the organisation to consider various media for communication, where dispersed consultants can stay connected and collaborate on dealing with pressing issues whenever the need arises. In such context, collaborative technologies such as email and the office communicator, particularly for texting were primarily used for operational purposes among team members. However, with the mass proliferation of social networking in society at large, the organisation wanted to capitalize on its operational experience to achieve strategic and competitive objectives. Subsequently, social media, particularly including a proprietary social networking site for intraorganisation communication and collaboration were implemented. Such recognition was primarily driven by the strong championing of senior managers in the organisation as noted by one of the interviewees:

“One of the things we've got here that works really well is our CEO is very keen into... he's very keen on innovation, very keen on enabling things that promote culture and improve basically the overall workplace. But he has a lovely way of doing it. It really puts people at ease. [...] his approach is] very inclusive and welcoming. In fact, on [social media], quite early on, he joined up. So when it was happening, he got involved and he was having discussions with people. He loves it because he's able to get opinions from across the board. He's not just hearing from the same group of people all the time. So you can speak to the analyst and the directors and everyone.”

Social media were therefore reconceived as crowdsourcing mechanisms that could be utilised for eliciting the opinions of employees on a wide spectrum of organizational issues, as agents for creating an open and inclusive organisational culture, and as tools for unleashing innovation. Senior management wanted to transcend any simple operational use for routine transaction based communication among employees to achieve strategic objectives, where new sources of income are discovers, and organisation wide cooperation ensues. This was particularly important for senior management, given the economic uncertainties emanating from the recent global financial crisis and from the strong competition in the marketplace. They anticipated that, by creating the optimal collaborative environment, the organisation will benefit from the innovative ideas generated, which could then be developed into new services and revenue streams. In demonstrating their unwavering
commitment towards such goal, management placed an optimistic goal for revenues generated from new innovations over a specified timeframe. One interview noted:

“obviously we may be on different floors, maybe out wherever we are, and then if you have a certain idea, good thing is if you did post something and then someone replies that you don’t even know, but they’re actually quite passionate and have similar ideas and you can easily connect with those people around and then network, things like that.”

Moreover, the use of social media contributed to flattening the organisation. Employees had the opportunity to, and were more comfortable in, communicating with their counterparts in other department, branches, and nations, and with their supervisors and senior managers. One of the managers interviewed noted the informality that the use of social media created:

“So it flattens the company structure. And one of the keys to making it work was that, early on [an employee placed a comment on social media] “I got to go to bed now. My 5-year old wants to use the laptop. Shush, don’t tell [senior manager’s name].” [The senior manager] came and saw and replied with, “It’s okay. I won’t.” And that sort of joking release, it really made it okay for people to put things out there and to be themselves.”

In such context, social media became connecting mechanisms for people dispersed across geographical, departmental, and hierarchical boundaries. It assisted employees in establishing and nurturing relationships with their counterparts across the organisation. It even assisted in forming personal relationships with selected clients who were sometimes added to private or public systems, as an interviewee asserted:

“Well, the technology does enhance relationship or allows you to, because it allows you to collaborate more often and speak with others when otherwise you might be with different clients and things like that.”

Some of the innovations emanating from social media included replicating the social media success that this organisation has achieved for clients. The use of social media in itself, therefore, became a commercialized service that the organisation was planning sell, as proposed here:

“We can help clients do similar things now that we’ve got on board [social media] and that sort of idea. We could certainly see the benefits for nearly any client. So we’re trying to sell those ideas and also in terms of policy use.”

Another example of innovation relates to carbon emissions accounting and reporting. At the time of the interviews the Australian government was attempting to introduce a carbon cap and trade system. In 2010, this was introduced, and is currently preceded by a carbon tax. Social media empowered employees to be proactive and take at the initiative in adapting to the new regulatory environment as noted by an interviewee:

“I’ve recently been involved somewhat in carbon emissions space for [this organisation]. I was putting in a reporting system for national reporting on our emissions. So I’m quite heavily involved in that, which is another project. And on that, I just posted a few things together some interest to see what people in [this organisation] were thinking about emissions [...] So that starts, sparks a debate.”

Importantly, social media empowered employees to take ownership and to display initiative in creating an inclusive and innovative environment. One of the interviewees, who took the initiative to develop a group via social media noted:

“So I set up the [social media] group for us and then we kind of used that to collaborate and form ideas etcetera. So I think that’s a pretty good tool because [employees in the organisation] have labeled me as the [social media] champion.”
Another interviewee was very happy to have provided advice to the CEO via social media and proud to be recognized by the CEO:

“The CEO put a question saying “I’m giving a speech on social media to 150 CEOs and directors. What are some interesting, ground breaking things that I could say?” Actually, nobody responded […] So I gave him some social media stats which I knew from one of these blogs. And then he immediately replied, “Oh, thank you [employee name] for that reply.” I actually took a screenshot of that and saved it. It’s the CEO thanking me!”

This also demonstrates the flattening of the organisation, as all employees from junior graduates to the CEO have common grounds to communicate and collaborate, in an environment where such collaboration is promoted and encouraged. This also provided employees with means to attain recognition in a large organisation, and where they could take ownership of their ideas and innovations. This was succinctly expressed by an interview as:

“It’s kind of good. Not only people see and know your name but also it’s a good way for collaborating.”

**DISCUSSION: SUCCESS DRIVERS**

The case study demonstrates that championing is an essential element in effective diffusion and value adding utilisation of social media in an organisation. The role played by the regional CEO in promoting both social (e.g. commenting on casual discussion) and business (e.g. feedback on innovation) interaction among employees in the organisation was viewed by the interviewees as an essential motivating drive for their ongoing involvement in using workplace social media platforms. This created a collaborative environment where it was easy to connect to the collective knowledge in the organization as noted by an interviewee:

“[When the] CEO or a manager… someone high up, used [social media] and asked the question, I think like, 10 or 20 people responded within like a day and he was really happy that he had such power in [getting feedback] that people responded quite quickly.”

Furthermore, allowing for the use of social media for both social as well as commercial purposes is important for the effective diffusion of social media in organisations. It promoted the transition of the habitual use of community based social media into the organisation in order to create business value. It also encouraged an increased frequency of accessing the social media, therefore improving their utilisation. In this organisation, employees would post pictures, comment on the status of one another, as well as propose new ideas, and follow the posts of other employees, hence bridging the social and the organisational to create a dual purpose environment for interaction and innovation. The casual perspective that people often adopt when using social media also contributed to substituting the formality of organisational bureaucracy with the free flowing creativity of social networking expressed as:

“it’s a balance between work related yet a bit more on the fun side.”

Moreover, recognition and ownership played a fundamental role in enticing employees to participate in organisational social media initiatives. In the past, innovative ideas would have to levitate through the bureaucratic chain of command. The innovators would lose track of the progress of their proposal, while their superiors attempt to ‘sell’ an idea that may still be vague in their minds to other departmental leaders, who could then percolate it to their subordinates. In such process, the original proposal may be misunderstood or watered down, particularly given its dissociation with the person who proposed it. Another inherent disincentive is the fear that the idea, if successful, will be claimed by others, and the proposer will get little recognition if at all. In such context, the use of social media created an incentive to innovate, as the proposer of a new idea is identified and encouraged to take ownership and responsibility in advocating and defending their proposal. Moreover, if any negative feedback is received, such feedback is balanced against positive feedback that the idea may also attract, which could lead to the innovation being fine-tuned rather than dismissed altogether.

Within this contribution rich environment, it was essential to establish a formal autonomous multidisciplinary team - with seed funding - to identify and pursue promising ideas for development and commercialisation. Such team could incorporate dedicated staff as well as various members from different departments to assist in the evaluation and further development of...
new ideas. The availability of seed funding at the disposal of the team improved the team’s efficiency in accelerating promising ideas towards innovations that could be commercialised, hence reducing any lost opportunity cost and boosting market competitiveness and adaptability. An interview explained this process as follows:

“We won some awards for our sort of innovation [...]. We also have an innovation zone which is a portal. It’s quite often that after they have a [social media] conversation, they’ll go into the innovation zone and put up an official idea. It’s somewhere where you can log official sort of ideas where you got somewhat of a business case behind. But quite often, our innovation council will look at that [on social media] if it’s something that attracts a lot of interest or something they see. They’ll look at it, you know, they’ll ask you to put a proper business case together and then from there, they may allocate funding to actually see if you can make it become a reality.”

Associating an organisational revenue target with the use of social media for innovation also played a critical role in promoting creativity. It presented a tangible example of the values that form and transform organisational culture. For employees, it demonstrated that their ideas count, that they are part of a collective community, and that organisational success is not merely a by-product of their functional accomplishment but also their organisation-wide intellectual creativity and contribution. The revenue target proposed by this organisation is not only measurable but also optimistic and empowering as it promotes the values that the organisation wishes to uphold and nurture.

Furthermore, the use of hybrid, proprietary and public web-based systems, promoted the use of social media for business value creation in the organisation. Restricting communications to a single system seems to play a negative role in their proliferation for business purposes. Allowing for the use of public web-based systems to compliment organisational proprietary systems assisted the organisation in exploiting extra functionality that it lacked in its system, while promoting an open environment of free networking and knowledge sharing.

CONTRIBUTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

This exploratory study holds interesting theoretical and practical implications. At a theoretical level, the study presents several dimensions that influenced the successful diffusion of social media in an organisation. It provides an important empirical investigation of issues influencing the successful diffusion of social media in the workplace. These issues may be of relevance to researchers in this field, who may wish to further investigate and expand upon these findings.

From a practical perspective, the study could be of significance to organisational leaders and managers, who are interested in transforming their organisations to become more innovative, flexible, and adaptive. The study highlights to prospective adopters the importance of strategic championing of social media in organisations, as well as the critical role that strategic planning plays through the formalisation and quantification of some of the benefits the firm anticipates to generate through social media, for instance, revenue targets that could be reviewed and assessed over time. The empowering influence of social media also presents a further incentive for organisational leaders to consider, in their quest for value creation and competitiveness.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with all research studies, this paper has several limitations. This exploratory study was limited to employees who volunteered to be interviewed. All those volunteers had an active engagement with, and positive attitude towards, social media in their organisational context. It is likely that others in the organisation may indeed have reservation and/or negative attitudes towards social media, and hence may have chosen not to volunteer for this study. Moreover, the study was conducted in a single branch of a single organisation. It is likely that views in other branches and other organisations, particularly organisation operating in different industries (e.g. manufacturing or construction) and in different socio-cultural contexts (e.g. where social hierarchy and social presence are viewed as essential), may differ. Such difference may be most pronounced in milieus where English, the de-facto language for most social media, is not spoken or used for business purposes.

This prompts the consideration of several research avenues. It will be interesting for future research to contrast this case on successful diffusion of social media, with cases on failure. This will provide for an interesting exploration and comparison that will enrich our understanding of both motivators and hindrances for the diffusion of social media in organisations. Future research may also consider the influence of national culture and organisational culture on the diffusion of social media.
could include organisations operating in non-English speaking contexts. Organisations operating in multiple industries may also be considered. Studies on the transformative agency of social media would also bring an interesting perspective in relation to the openness, accountability, transparency, and value creation achieved through such systems. This may also highlight the evolving role of the IT/IS professional as an organisational thought leader and innovation enabler, beyond what has been the traditional confines of technical proficiency. Demographical issues and their effect on the diffusion of social media may also provide for an important empirical insight into the diffusion of social media in organisations. Research in this field holds great potential for both theory and practice and may indeed provide an important impetuous for driving inclusive innovation in organisations.

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