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Adapt or Perish: Enterprise Social Networks and Innovation during Covid-19 Pandemic

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Adapt or Perish

Enterprise Social Networks and Innovation during Covid-19 Pandemic

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The changes hoisted upon society by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic were by no means confined to the interpersonal or intracommunal level. Businesses worldwide have faced radical changes to operating practices, either in response to personal concerns about the virus or government mandates requiring lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. Chief among the changes made to standard business operation was the sweeping crossover from “traditional” in-person working conditions to remote, work-from-home configurations. As such, many businesses and firms are facing a crisis: adapt or perish. With more firms swapping to entirely online models for the foreseeable future, management must concern themselves with how to keep communication and innovation at the forefront of their practices. Prior research confirms the importance of innovation to the continued success of a firm, both as a cognitive and practical construct. Firms who wish to survive must innovate, and yet the ongoing pandemic has severely stunted the ability for firms to foster a culture of collaborative innovation among their ranks.

To that end, our study offers, if not a solution, an assuagement to concerns regarding intrafirm communication and innovation enabled by Enterprise Social Network (ESN) applications. While not entirely novel, having existed in many iterations since the early days of text-based web applications, ESNs have experienced a renaissance recently. Given the necessity for collaborative innovation in the digital sphere, firms of all sizes now heavily rely on ESN applications like Slack and Microsoft Team for everything from day-to-day operation to concept ideation. Recognizing this widespread push into the digital sphere, this paper proposes a functional model for comparing the value of any given ESN application to a firm.

We posit that an ESN application fosters *Ideation*, *Collaboration*, and *Socialization* in a firm and supports the management team in improving innovation productivity, from a new product or service development to process enhancement. We empirically validated this model before and after work-from-home orders related to COVID-19 were implemented, with the goal of identifying how ESN applications could support teams scattered by circumstance. Results revealed the application of ESNs—toward ideation, collaboration and socialization—has a positive effect on (individual) innovation productivity. This effect is mediated by management participation. However, the effect of ESN application on innovation productivity is significantly higher for employees working remotely. In this context, the mediating role of management participation significantly decreased due to virtual work. This suggests innovation activities are less dependent on management support and participation when entire teams work virtually, possibly as a result of changes in work culture or power distance. Our findings provide a foothold for future research on virtual teams at the intersections of business, communication, and technology. By this, we mean that, given the potential increase in the adoption of ESN applications by firms long-term as a result of COVID-19, researchers can determine not only the value of existing ESN platforms, but engage in the conceptualization of new ESN technologies to facilitate innovation growth.