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Social Networking Technologies and Informal Knowledge Sharing in Organizations

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Abstract

This presentation investigates the role of corporate social networking technologies in knowledge sharing. Through this research we will investigate the take-up and uses of social network technologies (SNTs) by knowledge workers in formal social organizations. Our premise is that the uses of SNTs, and the personal networks of informal ties that this use both enables and encourages, are mutually constitutive. We focus on the mutual constitution of social networks and SNTs because organizations are increasingly finding information sharing initiatives imperative to their knowledge management activities, and social networking is the most well understood means to do this. In doing this research we pursue three contributions: (1) Conceptual insight and empirical support for the material nature and value of digitally-enabled social connections. (2) Advance current conceptual understanding of SNTs' organizational value. And, in doing this we build from and synthesize current and relevant research from several intellectual communities such as social computing, information systems, social network analysis, and organizational studies. (3) Articulate organizationally-relevant design and governance principles regarding SNT uses.

Keywords: Social Networking Technologies, Knowledge Sharing, Informal Networks

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Through this research we will investigate the take-up and uses of social network technologies (SNTs) by knowledge workers in formal social organizations. Our premise is that the uses of SNTs, and the personal networks of informal ties that this use both enables and encourages, are mutually constitutive. We focus on the mutual constitution of social networks and SNTs because organizations are increasingly finding information sharing initiatives imperative to their knowledge management activities, and social networking is the most well-understood means to do this (Mcafee 2009).

In doing this research we pursue three contributions: (1) Conceptual insight and empirical support for the material nature and value of digitally-enabled social connections. (2) Advance current conceptual understanding of SNT's organizational value. And, in doing this we build from and synthesize current and relevant research from several intellectual communities such as social computing, information systems, social network analysis, and organizational studies. (3) Articulate organizationally-relevant design and governance principles regarding SNT uses.

One subgroup of SNTs, which we call 'corporate SNTs (cSNT),' are being developed specifically for use within organizations. A cSNT is a web-based service which allows individuals to create and maintain online public or semi-public profiles and foster connections with other members of that organization. By creating and augmenting social connections, cSNTs are seemingly well-positioned to address time and space boundaries that plague knowledge sharing in most organizations and is particularly troubling for the largest enterprises (e.g., Cummings, Espinosa et al. 2009).

Despite the rapid uptake of cSNTs, and current fascination with their broader social implications, very little is known about the effects of these technologies on -- and their uses in -- enterprises (Richter and Riemer 2009). Most contemporary research on the uses of SNTs is focused on non-organizational or explicitly social contexts, with a particular emphasis on teens and students' uses of such systems (e.g. Hewitt and Forte 2006; Lampe, Ellison et al. 2006; boyd 2008; Peluchette and Karl 2008). To redress the gap in our understanding of the organizational effects of SNT, and cSNT in particular, this research sets out to study the ways in which cSNTs influence the formation and proliferation of informal networks of knowledge sharing within enterprises. In doing so, we will investigate how social networking technologies are different from classic knowledge management technologies, which primarily serve as knowledge repositories and impose top-down structures on organizational members. Our thesis is that the technological capabilities of SNT are different from those of classic information systems, because SNT embody less top-down structure and their take-up primarily interacts with informal social structures.

To study the take-up and uses of cSNT for informal knowledge sharing in enterprises, we build from the social networking perspective and actor-network theory. The social networking perspective allows us to capture the dynamics of informal social networks, through concepts like weak ties and boundary spanning. Actor-network theory complements the social network perspective, by offering insight on how cSNT interacts with other members of the network. The research approach is premised on a multiple-case design. Doing so allows us to contrast how the ways informal relationships, created and augmented by the use of cSNT, are enmeshed in organizational formal structure.

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