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Uses of Instant Messaging in the Workplace: The Influence of Organizational Policies on the IM Uses

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Abstract

To understand the use of Web 2.0 technologies in the workplace, and how the uses are influenced by organizational policies, we conducted a study to learn how social software, one type of typical Web 2.0 technologies, is used in the banking industry. Instant messaging was picked as our study target because instant messaging provides instant communication to its users and we believed instant communication is essential in the banking industry and communication can be considered as one of the most important tasks bank employees have to perform in their daily work. Banking industry was targeted because we believe that banks would be more cautiously in adopting technologies in their enterprise network and there should be strict guidelines in guiding technologies uses. Findings revealed that spillover effect does influence the interviewees' carryover of their IM home-use practices to the workplace.

Keywords: social software, instant messaging, spillover, organizational policies

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Abstract

Web 2.0, defined as “the Web as Platform”, is about communication (O’Reilly 2005; McAfee 2006). Web 2.0 technologies, web-based tools and services, allow users to participate, communicate and interact with others. To grasp the benefits of Web 2.0 technologies and aim at responding agilely to the ever-changing business environment, many organizations have already adopted different types of emergent Web 2.0 technologies in their enterprise networks. To understand the use of Web 2.0 technologies in the workplace, and how the uses are influenced by organizational policies, we conducted a study to learn how social software, one type of typical Web 2.0 technologies, is used in the banking industry. The social software we focused for this study is instant messaging. Instant messaging was picked as our study target because instant messaging provides instant communication to its users and we believed instant communication is essential in the banking industry and communication can be considered as one of the most important tasks bank employees have to perform in their daily work. Banking industry was targeted because we believe that banks would be more cautiously in adopting technologies in their enterprise network and there should be strict guidelines in guiding technologies uses.

We interviewed 20 banking employees working in two major banking corporations in Hong Kong. These two banks have deployed IBM Lotus Notes for communications. One of the banks allows Sametime, the Lotus Note instant messaging (IM) function, to run in its intranet, while the other bank prohibits such uses. We categorized the interviewees into three categories - senior, middle and junior. The categorization is based on the number of subordinates the interviewees had and the level of their immediate superiors.

There are several findings from this study:

- Findings revealed that spillover effect does influence the interviewees’ carryover of their IM home-use practices to the workplace. In the bank allowing IM (Bank A), the lower the organizational level the interviewee is, the more obvious spillover behavior is observed. Those junior interviewees spent significant proportion of their IM contents (more than 60%) for social purposes. Meanwhile, their senior and middle level colleagues would use IM for more business-oriented tasks. This phenomenon could be explained by spillover theory and task-technology-fit theory.
- In the bank disabling Sametime uses (Bank B), different IM uses patterns were observed. To interact with their clients and external business collaborators, some of the Bank B interviewees used Web-based IM applications for such interaction. The Bank B junior interviewees would use Web-based IM tools mainly for business-purposes. They seldom IM their friends or colleagues for social purposes. Over 80% of their IM contents were business-oriented. This different use pattern between the Bank A and Bank B junior interviewees revealed that organizational policies on IM uses do affect their IM use

patterns. Bank A employees adopted the same home-use IM pattern in the workplace while the Bank B junior employees use patterns seemed to be more influenced by organizational policies than by spillover theory.

- In Bank B, the communication tool used by the interviewees for social purposes was the organizational email system while their Bank A counterparts mainly used Sametime for social purposes. This finding revealed that the interviewees tended to use the application provided by the banks for social-oriented communications. This interesting finding indicates that the junior interviewees would feel more comfortable to chat in a “safe” environment.

Keywords: social software, instant messaging, spillover, organizational policies

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