Do Enterprise Social Networks Increase Productivity or Lead to Information Overload?

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Social media platforms have made fast inroads into the workplaces of organizations. According to recent studies, Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) will be implemented in 70% of all companies by the end of 2017. Besides the associated benefits of facilitating collaboration, networking and enterprise-wide knowledge sharing, they promise to accelerate innovation, improve creativeness, enhance productivity and organizational performance. Moreover, they yield the potential to drive knowledge worker efficiency to new levels and allow employees to connect across organizational boundaries and hierarchies. Another major reason for companies to implement ESNs is to reduce the information overload for their employees, caused by too many messages and a constantly full inbox. Information Overload is not only responsible for causing stress and poor decision-making, but is considered to be a major employee productivity drain.

Despite the impressive proliferation of ESNs, there is little research on whether the implementation of ESNs actually leads to an enhanced productivity and performance. On the contrary, there is some indication that ESNs might increase information overload as users face numerous new inputs, edits and contributions on the platform and often receive messages as additional email notification. We conducted several preliminary interviews of employees in a large knowledge-intensive company. Results indicate that some participants believed their ESN usage boosted their productivity and reduced their information overload, whereas others perceived the ESN to be stressful and time consuming.

Motivated by these first findings, this study's research question is: Do ESNs increase employees' productivity or create additional information overload? More specifically, our research objectives are (1) to analyze how and under what conditions ESN users benefit from an enhanced productivity or suffer from an increased information overload (2) to empirically validate a relationship between ESN usage and perceived individual productivity as well as information overload (3) to determine whether different types of ESN usage lead to an improved productivity or a higher information overload.

We aim to address this following a multi-method approach: We have recently conducted a quantitative survey in a global multinational company with 11367 respondents from over 30 countries. The ESN of this company has been introduced worldwide in 2013 with the goal of fostering collaboration, innovation and productivity and has since then reached mature saturation. To validate the findings of this quantitative survey and gain deeper insight, a series of additional face-to-face semi-structured interviews will be conducted with employees from different organizations with implemented ESNs. Furthermore, these qualitative insights will be strengthened using quantitative data from the respective organizations.

Our research aims to make three important theoretical and practical contributions: (1) we address a relevant gap in IS research by shedding light on the use-productivity relationship in this novel context (2) we analyze how different forms of ESN usage impact productivity or information overload and (3) these findings can enhance practitioners' and (community) managers' understanding on implementing and improving ESNs and thus support them in their efforts to decrease information overload and increase productivity.