



Enterprise social networking: A knowledge management perspective



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ABSTRACT

Employees' sustained knowledge contributions and their engagement in the platform is needed to materialize the organizational benefits from enterprise social networking (ESN). This paper adopts a knowledge management perspective on ESN. Through a mixed methods approach we examine how employees use ESN and the value of these uses. With a qualitative content analysis we identify five uses of ESN, problem solving, ideas and work discussion, events and updates, task management, and informal talk. With a survey we further show how these uses drive value of ESN. The results demonstrate that generating and obtaining new ideas for work by participating in discussions and finding solutions for work-related problems are the key sources of value. The results further show that the socially and work-oriented ESN uses are closely intertwined. Hence, the informal discussions in ESN are a lubricant for more utilitarian uses that should not be crowded out from the platform. Finally, we theorize that a specific advantage of ESN over information repositories and discussion forums is how ESN enables users to meet their social and work-related goals simultaneously. Our study offers a granular view of ESN use and guidance for developing organizational ESN policies.

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1. Introduction

Enterprise social networking (ESN) holds great promises for organizations. According to a McKinsey report (2012), effective use of social technologies can result in 20–25% improvement in knowledge worker productivity. A study by Forrester Research in an organization of 21,000 employees with 7000 Yammer users found a return on investment of 365% on an investment in an ESN platform over three years (Dodd, 2011). Given the prevalence of project work and cross-functional cooperation in today's knowledge economy, ESN promises to contribute to knowledge management (see von Krogh, 2012), increase employee performance (Kuegler, Smolnik, & Kane, 2015), and hence play a strategic role in a company's IT portfolio (Karoui, Dudezert, & Leidner, 2015). Against this backdrop, the widespread adoption of ESN by organizations is hardly surprising.

ESN are web-based platforms that allow people to (1) communicate messages with specific coworkers or broadcast messages to everyone in the organization; (2) explicitly indicate or implicitly reveal particular coworkers as communication partners; (3) post, edit, and sort text and files linked to themselves or others; and

(4) view the messages, connections, text, and files communicated, posted, edited and sorted by anyone else in their organization at any time of their choosing (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013).

Prior work argues that ESN can bring substantial benefits to knowledge management through increased vertical and horizontal communication (Davison, Ou, Martinsons, Zhao, & Du, 2014), enhanced knowledge transfer (Leonardi & Meyer, 2015), increased social capital (Kline & Konstanze, 2013), and the faster integration of new employees (Leidner, Koch, & Gonzalez, 2010). Since any organizational benefits will materialize only through individuals' sustained use of the platform (DeLone & McLean, 1992), it is essential to ensure that ESN is valuable for the individual user. Consequently, in order to ensure the active use and contributions of individuals to ESN as a public information good (Fulk, Heino, Flanagan, Monge, & Bar, 2004), it is important to understand how employees use ESN and what constitutes an ESN's value for its users. Consequently, we examine ESN usage forms (in short: uses) and their value for personal knowledge management (Bhatt, 2002; Razmerita, Kirchner, & Nabeth, 2014). Personal knowledge management refers to a collection of processes that an individual needs to carry out in order to gather, classify, store, search, and retrieve knowledge in his or her daily activities (Razmerita et al., 2014, p. 77).

Prior research suggests that ESN use can improve the accuracy of people's metaknowledge (knowledge of "who knows what"

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