

Use of Social Media in the Workplace: Contradictions and Unintended Consequences

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ABSTRACT

Even though social media technologies have been increasingly adopted in the workplace, few studies have looked at the consequences and contradictory outcomes of this adoption. This exploratory case study seeks to understand how organizations are using social media and what the consequences of this adoption are, from the perspective of managers and users. Ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers and social media users of a large professional association in the US (Pro-Org, a pseudonym). Preliminary findings suggest that adoption of social media is not a controlled process, and contradictory expectations among management and coping strategies from users may undermine organizational capacity to achieve its outcomes regarding social media.

Keywords

social media, web 2.0, user coping, Facebook, Twitter, work-life balance, sociotechnical system

INTRODUCTION

As organizations adopt social media tools to engage in conversation and marketing with their customers and stakeholders, different aspects of the organization such as structure and business processes have to be adapted. While previous studies have looked at social media from a strategic perspective (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Mangold and Faulds 2009), few studies have looked into the consequences of social media adoption for employees and organizational structure and processes. Understanding the consequences of social media adoption in the workplace is critical to leverage the potential these tools can bring to the organization.

In this exploratory study we examine these questions through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 managers and social media users in one of the largest professional association in the US. Our main goal was to understand how social media tools were being used, and what the intended and unintended consequences of this usage were to the organization. As is the case with other technologies, the adoption of social media is not an isolated event, and elicits changes in different aspects of the organization, such as structure, process and people/user behavior (Bostrom and Heinen 1977).

In the next session we present the study site, followed by an explanation of the theoretical framework used, based on socio-technical systems theory. Next we present the methods used and the findings obtained in this study. We conclude with the key implications for organizations and further research.

STUDY SITE

Our study site, Pro-Org, is headquartered in the MidWest United States. The organization has about 300 full-time employees. It is member-driven; the stated primary focus is to help its members become successful. Based on membership, Pro-Org is one of the largest professional organizations in the US and is pursuing a rapidly growing international member base.

Pro-Org was chosen for this case study because its top management sees the organization as highly committed to social media initiatives – even though, as will be mentioned in the findings, this view may not be shared by every manager or employee. Many departments have their own Facebook pages and Twitter feeds. In addition, there is some use of other Internet-based tools such as Dropbox and Ning, among others.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The socio-technical approach to the use of technology states that the technological and social aspects are intimately related. Adoption of a new technology not only depends on social circumstances, but also causes social consequences for its users (Trist and Bamforth 1951; Bostrom and Heinen 1977). Figure 1 below is a graphical representation of the application of this theoretical framework to the present case study. In this framework, the technical system is comprised of the technology under study, i.e., social media, and processes. The social system is comprised of the people and structure, i.e., relationships

between people. These four components are interdependent; changes to any component of the system affect other components. We next describe each component of the technical and social system.

The technology under study, social media tools, can be understood as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 61). These tools – such as Facebook and Twitter – may have different features and contain various functional blocks such as identity, relationships, conversation among others (Kietzmann et al. 2011). Business processes can be defined as “a set of logically-related tasks performed to achieve a defined business outcome” (Davenport and Short 2003, 100). In this framework, the adoption of social media tools is expected to affect and be affected by old and new processes.

The social system is comprised of the people and the social structure. The people element in the framework refers to the individuals in the organization, encompassing their personalities, beliefs, values, skills, and motivations (Piccoli 2008). The social structure refers to the “patterned or regularized aspects of the relationships existing among participants in an organization” (Scott 1987, 15). This structure may vary according to different degrees of formalization (ibid, p. 17). For example, the organization may have a centralized or a decentralized decision-making structure. In addition, reporting relationships, communication channels and reward mechanisms in the organization influence the structure of the organization (Piccoli 2008).

The model is dynamic. Adoption of social media tools may be constrained by existing processes but may also trigger creation of new ones. Adoption may also affect formal and informal organizational structures, and may provoke unintended consequences on the individuals of the organization. In its turn, structures and users shape the way technology is actually implemented in the organization. And finally, characteristics of the technology are also expected to impact the process, people and structure components.

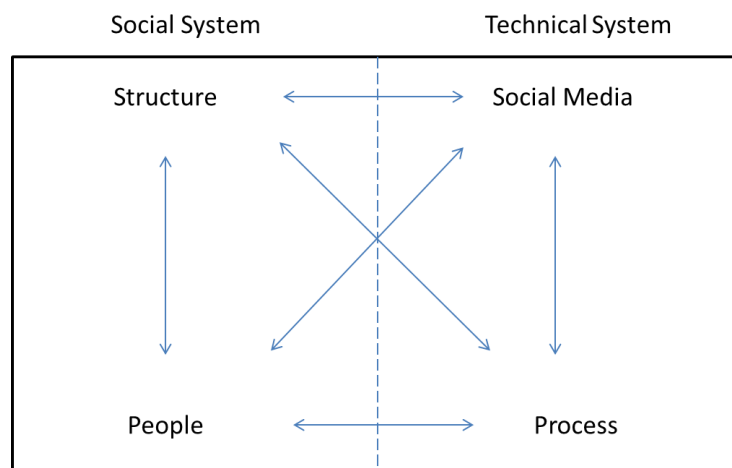


Figure 1. Socio-technical framework for the use of social media in organizations. Based on Bostrom and Heinen (1977) and Piccoli (2008).

METHODS

This study is part of a larger research project investigating social media in the workplace. A student member of the research team provided initial introductions to senior management at Pro-Org. Faculty research team members met with the social media director who gave agreement to participate in the study. The sampling strategy for participants was purposeful (Patton 1990). Our objective was to interview employees who could give us rich information about the issues central to our research. Rather than measuring levels of agreement or disagreement about social media, we aimed at having a variety of perspectives regarding Pro-Org’s use of these technologies. We asked to interview managers who were involved with social media as well as users who used social media in the performance of their work activities. Ten employees who met these criteria agreed to participate in the interviews. Five of the interviewees were senior management with some level of strategic interest in social media, while five were social media users directly responsible for managing channels such as Facebook pages or Twitter feeds. Seven were female and three were male.

Data collection

We developed a semi-structured interview protocol to allow for systematic comparison across informants (Kvale, 1996). The protocol asked respondents to describe their use of technology as well as the nature of their work, and their relationship to their organization, their managers, and their coworkers. We asked participants to reflect on changes in their work practices from their earliest days of use of social media to the present. We also asked specific questions about the kinds of information

and communication technologies (ICTs), including social media, used by interviewees, and the ways that they used those ICTs for a variety of work and relational tasks. We paid attention to eliciting challenges, suggestions, and overall opinions regarding the role of technology in work, and how informants talked about changes in their use of ICTs over time.

Interviews were held at PRO-Org's offices in a private room and conducted by members of the research team. At least one of the co-authors of this paper participated in all interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were recorded with the permission of the interviewee. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Analysis

For data analysis, we began with an open coding approach to the interviews (Miles and Huberman 1994). In this stage, the authors coded the same two interviews to check for themes that emerged in this open process. After that, the coding scheme was more narrowly defined, based on the initial open coding and the themes that emerged during the interview process.

For example, a number of employees discussed the ways they managed their personal and professional on-line activities. As such, we created a code labeled 'user coping strategies' to capture this phenomenon. For each interview, we also coded the different types of social media used, and how the media were used for work and non-work purposes. We also identified benefits and challenges discussed by the respondents.

FINDINGS

Findings are presented in two parts. In the first part we discuss the organizational objectives for adopting social media as reported by the interviewees. Next, based on the theoretical framework described above, we present the findings for the technology (social media tools), process, people, and structure components of the socio-technical system. Although there are systemic effects among the four components, we discuss each component separately for analytical purposes.

Organizational reasons for adoption

Regarding the organizational reasons for adoption of social media, three themes emerged from the interviews: the necessity "to be where the audience is"; the realization that since debates about Pro-Org were already happening on social media, they should join the debate; and some skepticism about the tangible benefits of this technology.

The majority of the managers believe the organization made a correct decision in adopting social media. The necessity "to be where the audience is" was an important consideration. The fact that many of the members of this association are present on social media has significantly driven the management decision to adopt these tools. This seems to be not only a matter of improving communication with members, but also an issue of accountability. If members are using this media to communicate with others, then the organization needs to adopt the media to communicate with members.

"But I guess from my perspective, I think you know you've gotta – you've gotta have skin in the game. You've gotta be out there with – with where you know, technology, and you know, communication, is all going. Especially with this younger group of members that are now in the business that are completely technology savvy." (Female user)

Second, managers perceived that debates about the organization (i.e. criticisms of the organization's efficiency) were already happening in social media, and if they did not adopt social media, they would not be able to defend their point of view. As one of the managers put it:

"You always have the downside of instant accessibility and negative thoughts, but the beauty is that you also have the instant accessibility to counter those negative thoughts. People are going to post and say what they want to say. But as far as a downside, no, my god, it is an unbelievably effective way to get out a message quickly to a lot of people". (Male manager)

Even though the majority of the interviewees approved the use of social media, there was some skepticism among managers and users. Some questioned the fact that most members are not that active on social media, and that they still prefer to receive communication via regular mail. In this purview, social media has not proved its return-on-investment (ROI). One of the managers stated:

"I don't see the overall aggregate value yet about the social media platforms that exist out there for our business." (Male manager)

Social Media Tools

In this section we look at how social media tools are perceived by managers and users in Pro-Org. We first present some definitions about social media, and how interviewees themselves define social media. Next, we address the three main implications, regarding use of social media tools, which emerged from the interviews: changing pace of communication with members; limitations due to the how social media is defined in Pro-Org; and blending of personal and professional identities.

Social media comprises an emerging and evolving set of software applications. In practice, there is little understanding as to what applications or characteristics of applications constitute social media (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Previous research has shown that interpretations about technology and expectations of use in organizations influence the way the tools become embedded in the work practices of users (Orlikowski and Gash 1990). People's assumptions and beliefs then constrain and enable the choices they make in using the technologies. In light of this research and the emergent nature of the technology, we asked interviewees to identify which applications they considered to be social media and why, i.e., provide a definition of social media.

In general, interviewees identified Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and to a lesser extent Ning, as social media applications. There was consensus that social media involves a 'conversation' and is 'user generated.' It is faster and involves more people than previous communication platforms. It has the capability to 'go viral.' As the quote below illustrates, most interviewees emphasized the ability to easily access large numbers of people as being a defining characteristic of social media.

“Social media I would consider anything that could go viral with a touch of a button. So anything that I can send you that you can immediately get to hundreds of people with the click of a button. So you know Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, um any of those like Instagram, the Pinterest, all of those.” (Female – user)

Pro-Org is an externally-focused member-driven organization. Thus, it is not surprising that managers and users expressed common assumptions about the value of social media for communication with members and other external stakeholders. Interestingly, employees did not identify other collaborative tools such as Dropbox, Skype, etc. as social media even though they reported use of these tools to collaborate with external and internal colleagues. Interviewees seem to intuitively mark the difference between web 2.0 and social media technologies (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010).

The identified characteristics of social media have a number of implications that employees took into account. In particular, social media allows Pro-Org to reach many members, as well as other stakeholders, rapidly and in a more customized and personal manner than other media. On the other hand employees seemed to be aware that these same characteristics meant that the interaction with members could change in a rapid and uncontrolled manner, e.g., posts to social media platforms might elicit unpredictable responses and comments from the audience.

Also, there is the possibility that this framing of social media technologies may be limiting opportunities to use social media tools for other purposes, such as internal work collaboration and sharing of information (Andriole 2010). Organizational information was being posted across many different Pro-Org Facebook pages and Twitter feeds; however, employees did not view this, at first, as a way to find organizational information from other departments or work groups. Only when probed did some employees acknowledge that social media did facilitate sharing of information.

Widespread use of social media tools means that many employees have personal Facebook pages and presence on other social media sites. A commonly cited concern expressed by interviewees was the blurring of their personal and professional identity. As one manager recounted:

“I will say one of the things that I find frustrating about Facebook is I set it up for personal use but I cannot hide. [laughter] So now I have got Pro-Org strategic planning stuff connected to my personal page and I do not really know [how to remove it], I suppose if I was willing to spend more time I could figure that out” (Female manager)

Social networking websites (especially Facebook) maintain terms of service that may force some blending of work/personal life. For example, Facebook's terms of service prohibit users from having more than one profile¹. This forces users to either use their personal profile for work-related purposes (something many users do not want to do) or break Facebook's terms of service by creating a second, work-related profile on this website.

Process

In order to understand how social media was being used to achieve the expected business outcomes, we asked users to describe the tasks they performed using social media applications. For example, we asked them to describe the process of posting content, e.g., how they knew what to post on social media, and to what extent they had to ask permission to engage in conversations with Pro-Org members. In terms of process, there are four findings that are worth mentioning: the need for new work practices; the evolving capacity of users of social media; the variety of skills and approaches; and the trade-off between effective engagement and organizational resilience.

The first refers directly to the nature of social media. Usually, IT tools or applications are deployed to automate or enhance some existing business process, such as simplifying a workflow. Designers have intentions of how software tools are to be used. In the case of social media, though, these tools bring the need for new work practices. Management has high-level goals but employees have little guidance as to procedures to achieve these goals. Interviewees reported that Pro-Org has few processes regarding interactions in social media. Should the interaction be to “like” a comment or “like” a page or post to a

¹ Facebook terms of service, item 4.2: “You will not create more than one personal account.” (Facebook, 2013).

page or create a group? What type of information should be posted, when to post, or how often to post? The continuously evolving features that are added to social media platforms, especially Facebook, complicate these decisions. Guidance for employees is often very abstract as described by the following user:

“And it’s also um uh management looks at it as a solution a lot of the time... like today I was told, you know, we really need to start posting on these Global Committee’s Facebook pages. Can you go through and find every Global Committee’s Facebook page? There are over a hundred Global Committees so I’m gonna have to go through [laughter], find every one, like every one, and then post on every one.” (Female user)

As mentioned above, Pro-Org adopted social media to communicate in a more efficient way with its stakeholders, who were already active on social media. As such, many decisions of which application to use and the content to post are based on the audience and determined by the individual employee. Most Pro-Org members are on Facebook and, as such, this is the main tool used by the organization. There is one relevant community of members that is active on Twitter, and thus Pro-Org’s department responsible for this segment will engage more on Twitter than Facebook.

Second, it takes time for social media users to become confident regarding their autonomy to post on social media. Users described a learning process: initially they will usually ask other users or managers to check if the content to be posted is appropriate; with time, self-confidence is gained, and they no longer ask for approval.

“When I first started I would ask people if they thought it was appropriate just ‘cause I didn’t know really what I was doing. But now I’m comfortable enough to know whether or not it would be meaningful for somebody to read.” (Female – user).

An exception is when a member posts a criticism or asks about a more sensitive topic on any of Pro-Org’s social media profiles; in this case, this type of comment may even reach the CEO of Pro-Org. When asked how seriously comments made on social media were taken, a manager said:

“Very seriously...Depends on what it is but it may go directly to the CEO”. (Female manager)

Third, since there is no formalized process for interactions through social media, each user seems to develop a particular set of best practices. We found users who seem to be very proficient on social media, devising innovative engagement methods which reflected a better understanding of the media; others had a simpler approach, with no strategy. One particular user seemed to be really savvy and had different strategies for Twitter use. For example, this user reported:

“I subscribe to a 30% rule, where 30% of the time I am promoting or communicating what I want to communicate, or what we want to communicate. 30% of the time I am simply re-tweeting what other people have said. Sharing and spreading the love is 30%. Sometimes that is with intention, because of how we want to be perceived. 30% of the time it is engaging in conversation.” (Female user)

Finally, this lack of process-based approach seems to have both advantages and disadvantages. The good side of it is that social media works well when communications are more personalized, leading to more engagement with the audience. The problem is that the more personalized the organization’s action on social media, the harder it is to replace the employee. At Pro-Org, one of the most engaging social media users was being moved to another function, and management was concerned that the Twitter feed managed by this user would “lose the voice”. This seems to be a trade-off organizations face when using social media for stakeholder engagement (Biggs 2011).

People

As the framework indicates, the motivations, skills, and backgrounds of individuals affect and are affected by the technologies adopted in the organization. There are three main findings in this section.

The first refers to the different levels of employee motivation for using social media. While some employees were really committed to making their social media activities engaged, others had a more blasé approach to it, as just one more task to perform. Some of them were excited about building “relationships”, and developing new approaches to communication on social media, while others seem to be performing a perfunctory task.

Second, skill level also differs among employees. The fact that most individuals have used these tools for personal reasons before the adoption by the organization may lead managers to think that everybody has the necessary skills to leverage their highest potential. We found that while all were able to perform the necessary tasks – such as posting something on Facebook – there was demand for more capacity. As one user puts it:

“I guess the downside [of using social media at work] for me is more personal, because I feel frustrated that I could – I could do a better job with managing. Um, I want to know more and I want to understand like how to be really savvy with the social media.” (Female user)

Third, a relevant issue regarding social media adoption in the workplace is the blending of work and personal identities. As mentioned before, according to the terms of service, Facebook accounts must be personal; at the same time, users did not want to use their personal account for work-related activities. As such, some users reported having two Facebook accounts, and that they try to maintain their private and work life separate.

“I have my personal-personal Facebook page and then I have kind of a [personal]-work Facebook page that – it’s me but it’s not my day to day personal one.” (Female user)

Management expectations regarding this are contradictory. At the one hand, they seem to agree social media demands personal engagement, and as such they would like users to freely use their personal accounts for work-related postings. On the other hand, they do not have clear guidelines about what is appropriate, and many users suggested the organization may not be tolerant regarding sensitive postings. For example, some employees had “liked” political candidates on Facebook, and some members complained to Pro-Org management because they saw this as a Pro-Org endorsement of candidates. In reality, this could be just because “liking” a page is a way to receive updates about this candidate, not meaning personal – much less organizational – endorsement.

One manager exemplifies this contradictory position:

“This is what we teach our folks on social media. You know, when you’re in social media just like when you’re in a relationship with somebody in the real world, you wanna be authentically yourself. So – and I am never not an employee of Pro-Org. I am never not my son’s mother. I am never not a wife. I’m all of those things at the same time really because I’m one person. ... So why should I disconnect those facets in the social media space? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“We go through this internally because people have trouble with, I don’t know, can I post a personal opinion – it’s like well, yeah, you can have personal opinions but when you’re addressing that opinion you’re never not an employee of Pro-Org. So if you know it’s an opinion that’s contrary to Pro-Org, is it really necessary for you to publically express it? Do you feel that strongly about it? If not shut up about it.”

Structure

Formal and informal organizational structure may function as a constraint to the usage of new technologies. There are three issues that emerged from the interviews: how organizational structure (in this case, hierarchy and decision-making channels) negatively affected adoption of an internal-oriented social media technology; initial adoption of social media was uncontrolled and prompted the creation of policies; and as social media became more relevant, the organization moved to a more centralized strategy.

One episode at Pro-Org illustrates well this interaction between structure and technology. Some years ago, a group of employees at Pro-Org started to use Yammer for internal collaboration. People started to use it naturally, usage growth was organic, and real collaboration was going on. But it seems upper management shut down the use of this tool mostly because no permission was asked. As one subject explained:

“We had a group of employees about four years ago that set up I do not even remember what kind of a site it was, for internal use. And while I suspect if they had gone to the CEO and said, “We’d like to do this and here’s why,” it would have gone well, but they did not go to the CEO and they it kind of snuck up on him. So he shut it down.” (Female manager)

The reaction of management in this event might provide additional explanation as to why Pro-Org uses social media primarily for external communications. This episode might have precluded other initiatives. As another subject puts it:

“Yammer ended up being killed just because the CEO said, “No, it’s done.” And I’ll admit there’s been a chilling factor internally for staff to do anything similar.” (Male manager)

Structure may also be affected by new technologies. Two aspects of structural change are worth mentioning. First, initial adoption of social media in the organization was not a controlled process. Different departments within the association started to create profiles in many social media, leading to a lack of control by management. This provoked the creation of a social media policy and guidelines. Even though this has shown to establish effective rule regarding creation of new profiles in social media, most managers and users have no knowledge about the content of these policies. As two subjects put it:

“There is a social media policy um, but I’m you know – we’re all bound by it, but it – it uh, it’s not clear to me exactly what – what’s outlined in it.” (Female user)

“It’s probably – it’s probably it’s better to ask forgiveness than to ask permission. That might be the policy. You have to wipe that out. [Laughs] I am sure there is one and I’d be hard-pressed to relate it to you.” (Female manager)

Second, Pro-Org hired an industry executive to head the social media strategy of the organization. Contrary to what would be expected, though, this person was not coordinating the many social media users throughout the organization. The attention of this executive was focused on the larger social media conversation in an attempt to influence some industry specialists who were particularly vocal and not always supportive of Pro-Org. For example, there was a blog that constantly criticized Pro-Org's activities, and by engaging in social media, the organization was able to influence the conversation generated by the blog and create a more positive conversation.

The creation of Facebook pages and Twitter feeds across the multiple departments at Pro-Org seemed to be more organic and emergent. As we concluded our interviews, management was considering a move to a more centralized and controlled approach to their social media presence.

CONCLUSION

Even though social media technologies have been increasingly adopted in the workplace, few studies have looked at the consequences and contradictory outcomes of this adoption on internal organizational technical and social systems. Preliminary findings suggest that adoption of social media is not a controlled process, and contradictory expectations among management and coping strategies from users may undermine organizational capacity to achieve its outcomes regarding social media.

Our study was conducted through interviews with 10 employees of one professional service organization. Future research should examine different types of organizations, e.g., business organizations, governmental organizations, as well as different size organizations, e.g., SME, large global organizations, to better understand this phenomenon. Besides, themes identified in our findings could be further explored, such as the blurring of personal and professional identities, centralized versus decentralized governance strategies, and the importance of training, among others. We believe our study takes a first step in developing understanding of how organizations are using social media and what the consequences of this adoption are.

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