

Chapter 7

Social Media and Knowledge Management in a Crisis Context: Barriers and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The role of social media in managing and disseminating organizational knowledge is illustrated in this case study of a local government's response to a natural disaster. The interplay of technological, organizational and ecological factors was magnified as town officials utilized both social media and traditional media to disseminate information to the public during and after the crisis. As organizations embrace social media, managers must recognize that in addition to the organization educating the public, social media features the public talking to the organization, and perhaps more resonant, the public talking to the public.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge, information, and data are central to all organizations, and most especially in the postmodern context. Whether rooted in action, content, people, or process, most discussion of knowledge management understandably focuses on KM within the organization. As organizations increasingly embrace social media, however, communication with external publics and the associated challenge to KM becomes an area of consequence. An organization's knowledge management strategy consists of orientation (organizational proactivity/reactivity to knowledge gathering and development), milieu (emphasis on tacit or explicit knowledge; embedding knowledge in technology or personnel), and scope (the breadth of topics for which knowledge is sought), and these are interdependent (Kasten, 2008). In most organizations, strategic knowledge management is reflected in the tactical day-to-day actions in the organization.

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Employee knowledge can be utilized as a strategic input that can shape culture, but knowledge creation and sharing is not always directly tied to compensation and reward structures (Pasher & Ronen, 2011).

Knowledge is much more than the information created, transformed, disseminated, or embedded in products, systems, or individuals (Bodhanya, 2008).

The cognitive-possession, or first order, positivist approach to knowledge management conceptualizes knowledge as static and reified, while the systems theory and complexity theory perspectives recognize the dynamic and adaptive properties of a knowledge ecology. Increasingly, the KM discourse has come to distinguish between knowledge as a resource or commodity and knowledge as a process (Bodhanya, 2008).

A pyramid of knowledge exists, beginning with “data” as the foundation, the processed raw material of the data becomes “information,” and that is in turn transformed into “knowledge.” This emerges through action and the capability to solve problems that arise. At the next level, “intellectual capital” combines the knowledge of the entire organization both intangible and tangible, and finally at the peak comes “wisdom,” which allows the identification of the most effective use of knowledge and intellectual capital for organizational success (Pasher & Ronen, 2011). Knowledge management leaders identify increased internal knowledge sharing, increased employee collaboration, and improved decision-making as key factors in effective KM. One significant challenge, however, stems from communication barriers (Croteau & Dfouni, 2008). These may be social or technological in origin, and in either case, can limit organizational effectiveness if not addressed in a timely manner.

The first stage of KM focused on intellectual capital and finding the best use of technology for coordination and sharing of knowledge. The second stage included a new focus on communities of practice, recognizing the importance of human factors in the KM process. The third stage emphasized content management and retrievability. A fourth stage may now be emerging that extends information and knowledge to an extra-organizational context (Koenig, 2008). A prerequisite for future knowledge management is documenting and codifying existing knowledge efficiently (Pasher & Ronen, 2011).

Following a systems perspective that views organizations as dynamic and complex entities interacting with their environment, it becomes clear that the flow of information and knowledge occupies a central position in determining the organization’s success. A hierarchically-ordered interdependent system allows information and resources to enter and exit via permeable boundaries (Miller, 2015). This process is challenged when social media is added to the mix, accelerating and intensifying the exchange and feedback processes. In systems theory, the focus is on holistic relationships and the permeable boundaries between the organization and its environment. The positive and negative feedback processes contribute to the system’s stability or turbulence. In this perspective, the manager is placed firmly within the dynamic system rather than as an external observer; in an emergent system both information and human identity are constantly emergent (Bodhanya, 2008).

As demonstrated in this case study, an organization’s environment extends beyond the physical to encompass the information environment. An organization’s information environment is constructed and enacted by organizational members as their actions allow them to engage in sensemaking, or the reduction of equivocality. Since unpredictability is inherent in any information environment – and heightened during periods of crisis – organization members utilize procedures and processes to select key informational inputs and utilize them in sensemaking (Miller, 2015). Even in a relatively small organization, such as the local government examined here, best practices in knowledge management and crisis communication are required for organizational success.

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