

Knowledge Blogs in Firm Internal Use

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge sharing in today's distributed organizations is a challenge. Hierarchical structures may not support the fast flow of information or the efficient co-creation of knowledge from specialized and tacit individual knowledge bases (see Grant, 1996; Miles et al., 2000; Adler, 2001). There is therefore a need to devise new patterns for leveraging dispersed knowledge within organizations and across organizational borders. In the following we explore internal company weblogs as a potential new channel for sharing knowledge and expertise.

Knowledge is deeply embedded in social interaction. Recent advances in ICT have led to the production of social software, the primary purpose of which is knowledge sharing (Teigland & Wasko, 2005). One example of this is the emergence of *weblogs* (or *blogs*), personal Web pages that incorporate regular posts in reverse chronological order about a particular topic, current events or personal thoughts and expression (Blanchard, 2004; Herring et al., 2004; Wagner & Bolloju, 2005). Our focus is on internal *knowledge blogs*. A small proportion of blogs could be classified as knowledge blogs, implying the online equivalent of professional journals in which authors *share new knowledge in their professional domains*: they report on their research progress, share references and make observations (Wagner & Bolloju, 2005). However, the application of blogs in knowledge management is a new phenomenon, and firms have been slow to do so. Current research fails to promote understanding of the applicability of blogs in networked teams and organizations, and of their role in the social processes of knowledge sharing and creation.

Thus we contribute to the emerging literature by exploring the critical factors involved in applying

internal company blogs. Most studies have addressed only the rational part of mediated communication, that is, the characteristics of communication technologies and their capacity for managing and transferring information. Our aim in this article is to include the social perspective, and to provide a categorization that combines the rational-social and individual-organizational dimensions. We then report on a mini-case study in order to illustrate the identified factors. We argue that anyone wishing to exploit the potential of knowledge sharing through internal blogs should understand their nature and characteristics in order to be able to make the best possible media choices.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge Blogs

Knowledge blogs are used in internal communication for knowledge-sharing purposes (Zerfass, 2005): to promote a shared understanding of the perspectives of CEOs and employees (Dearstyne, 2005), to coordinate projects and present ideas, and to bridge the gaps between individuals with various views in order to identify new trends in innovation communities (Wagner & Bolloju, 2005). Knowledge sharing, collaboration and best practices are endemic in blogs (Ojala, 2004).

Knowledge blogs appear at the intersection of professional communication and personal reflection. They serve as an ideal medium for experts sharing an interest in a specific topic: they enable storytelling, reflection, the capturing of information, and the sharing thoughts or ideas, thus making individuals' "hidden" processes more visible and promoting both personal and collective learning (Röll, 2004; 2006). Thus, they can offer business representatives a means

for expanding the boundaries of knowledge sharing and creation (Herring et al., 2004). Blogs as a social medium facilitate the sharing of both objectified (codified) and collective knowledge (social/organizational practices and experiences).

Approaches to Computer-Mediated Communication

Theories of computer-mediated communication (CMC) have been categorized as rational or social (see Kock, 2005; Webster & Trevino, 1995). The former rely on the hypothesis of rationality and effectiveness, involving users who select the communication medium of appropriate richness and level of social presence for each task. According to the early theories regarding the effects of CMC, the “richer” the media are (i.e., the more they allow nonverbal cues, provide immediate feedback, and convey personality traits), the better suited they are to human-to-human interaction (Short et al., 1976; Daft & Lengel, 1986).

From a social perspective, alternative approaches concentrating on the applicability of CMC have emerged, including the social-influence model devised by Fulk et al. (1990), social information processing theory as developed by Walther (1996), and Lea and Spears’ (1992) theory of social identity and de-individuation (SIDE). According to the social-influence model, the technological features are not inherently decisive in the choice of communication media, but they are influenced by social-group norms and membership (Fulk et al., 1990; Markus, 1994). Walther (1996), in turn, suggests in his theory of social information processing that the “cues-filtered-out” conditions in CMC do not prevent relational communication, although social relationships take a longer time to develop in computer-mediated groups than in face-to-face groups. The SIDE theory concerns processes of social identification and self-categorization, that is, in-group and out-group membership (Lea & Spears, 1992). Attention should be paid to these processes given that similarity with group members is believed to strengthen the individual’s identity, which in turn has a positive effect on their willingness to co-operate (Kramer et al., 1996; Järvenpää & Leidner, 1999).

THE MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

In the following we discuss the critical factors involved in applying internal knowledge blogs. Some of the issues are naturally also related to other organizational communication media, but here we assess them in the context of blog communication, its defining characteristics and patterns of use in organizations.

The Nature of Blog Communication

We strongly believe that there should be conscious *media choice* in both firm-internal and firm-external knowledge sharing and creation (Robert et al., 2005). In order to exploit their concrete benefits, organizations should be aware of the strengths of blogs: they offer continuity, they concentrate on one or a few topics, and they promote efficient information management, the forming of networks around specific issues, the maintenance of shared narratives and the telling of stories (Cayzer, 2004; Röhl, 2004; Wagner & Bolloju, 2005). They also facilitate the building of personal identity/status and simultaneously provide users with high connectivity, thus cultivating the development of online networks. As a medium, they are time and space flexible as they do not tie the receiver to a certain place or time. They also allow the receiver to process the message until it is wholly understood, and to search for extra information to ease understanding or to evaluate content and creditability. Blogs leave a record of the issues discussed, which is an advantage in business situations, and typically offer easy access to additional resources through hyperlinks, trackbacks (reverse hyperlinks) and other recommended blogs (Cayzer, 2004; Herring et al., 2004).

High-presence media seem to set demands on us that cannot always be fulfilled as we are not able to process so much information at once. Hence, Robert et al. (2005) came to the conclusion that rich media with a high social presence may ease the exchange of simple ideas, and hinder the exchange of more complex ideas (see Markus,¹ 1994). This would imply that blogs could be well suited to more complex information exchange, to generating ideas, developing insights, and maintaining shared narratives (Wagner & Bolloju, 2005). On the other hand, they must attract the attention of the receiver: such low-presence media can be easily ignored (see Robert et al., 2005).

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