

Chapter 19

Twitter–Based Knowledge Sharing in Professional Networks: The Organization Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Social media provides professional organizations with a new means of distributing information and perhaps even facilitating learning among their members. This study compares Twitter use in two populations, academics and corporate professionals, and in two interaction contexts, conference and non-conference, looking at how knowledge is shared by organizations. Organizations in three fields—nursing, information technology, and educational technology—were included in the study. A content analysis showed that both types of organizations focused more on supplying original content than providing links or retweets. Conferences generated the greatest activity levels and industry organizations were more savvy with Twitter use, although on the whole hashtags were underutilized and much room remains to maximize use of social media. Nonetheless, a wealth of knowledge sharing that can support information learning and professional development is taking place in these online networks.

INTRODUCTION

Learning how to succeed in a career requires more than just earning a degree from an institution of higher education. Post-degree learning experiences may include employer-based train-

ing; discipline-based workshops, seminars, and continuing education courses; and a wide range of less formal experiences including mentoring, networking, and attending conferences. These ongoing learning experiences range from those that are highly regulated and organized to those that are more likely to be user-driven, just-in-time, and individualized.

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Professional organizations are one source of support for career-based learning. Professional organizations often face the challenge of meeting the diverse needs of a dispersed membership. Although annual meetings and local chapters long have been used to bring together members in a face-to-face setting for professional interactions, increasingly new communication technologies such as Twitter are being used to help support interactions and communication, both between the organization and its members and among its members. In this chapter, we compare the cases of six different professional organizations and how they used Twitter to support professional communication with their membership over a six-month period, inclusive of their annual conference.

BACKGROUND

Traditional professional development has been didactic in nature, focused on disseminating knowledge to individuals. However, a paradigm shift may be in order, including increased efforts to provide professional learning opportunities that can be blended with authentic practice (Webster-Wright, 2009). In some ways, this trending toward embedded and embodied learning is not new, but rather represents a new respect and support for types of informal professional learning that have long occurred to meet the on-the-job needs of individuals.

Professional networks support a great deal of workplace and professional-oriented learning. On the local and more informal end, these networks may be as simple as a group of peers—either within one institution or representing different ones—with similar jobs who can contact each other as needed for learning, sharing, and support. However, larger professional networks may be formed either by individuals who mine their professional connections with an explicit intent to grow a network or by formal professional orga-

nizations whose purpose is to support continued learning and networking.

The impact of professional networks on the success of their members is a well-studied area. For example, successful university faculty are likely to interact regularly with and seek counsel from their colleagues (Hitchcock, Bland, Hekelman, & Blumenthal, 1995). Physicians, who often avoid the Internet in a professional capacity due to risks of lawsuits, can benefit from professional interactions and networking with colleagues in closed online communities (Hyman, Luks, & Sechrest). Online networks have the potential of connecting medical professionals with similar specialties across geographical boundaries which may ultimately result in better professional development for them as well as better care for their patients (Prasanna, Seagull, & Nagy, 2011).

Part of the reason why professional networks can have such an impact on member success is because they serve as informal knowledge hubs. Lam (2000) notes that professional knowledge may be individual or collective, and explicit or tacit. Each of these types of knowledge may be learned and transmitted in different ways within an organization—embrained, embodied, encoded, and embedded—with the tacit forms being most effectively transmitted via community or networks. With this in mind, participating in a combination of internal (within institution or company) and external (within field at large) networks may be desirable, with each enhancing the other and allowing the influx and outflow of new ideas with internal encouragement and support to try these new ideas (Morris, 2003).

However, professional networks are not a panacea for individuals who need knowledge and support, and studies of their impact in members' lives have yielded conflicting results. In one study, nurse managers indicated that their professional networks did not help them in dealing with management-related issues (Lindholm, Dejin-Karlsson, Östergren, & Udén, 2003). In

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