Chapter 2
Measuring the Impact of Social Media:
Connection, Communication and Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on a method, social network analysis (SNA) that can be used to assess the quantity and quality of connection, communication and collaboration mediated by social tools in an organization. An organization, in the Canadian public sector, is used as a real-life case study to illustrate how SNA can be used in a pre-test/post-test evaluation design to conduct a comparative assessment of methods that can be used before, during and after the implementation of organizational change in work processes. The same evaluation method can be used to assess the impact of introducing new social media such as wikis, expertise locator systems, blogs, Twitter and so on. In other words, while traditional pre-test/ post-test designs can be easily applied to social media, the social media tools themselves can be added to the assessment toolkit. Social network analysis in particular is a good candidate to analyze the connections between people and content as well as people with other people.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN ORGANIZATIONS

Knowledge management researchers have been unified in voicing the notion that the sharing of information and knowledge is critical in all organizations (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, Ruggles, 1998, Davenport and Prusak, 1998). Robert Buckman, of Buckman Labs, an early pioneer in successfully managing knowledge states that it is the flow of information that gives rise to valuable knowledge:

This is not the story of me, but a story about our associates and what they did. We wanted to become more customer-driven as an organisation. That meant having our people effectively engaged with them and taking responsibility for satisfying their needs and expectations. To accomplish this, we needed to speed up the processes of sharing knowledge so we could serve our customers better.

Our people needed answers from whoever had them, anywhere in the world. We were a multinational company that needed to become a global organisation. The whole thing was a journey, and it has invaded the fabric of our corporation. It didn't start out as knowledge management – we tried to do what we thought was best at the time to improve the speed at which we could respond to the needs of our customers. Then, something new comes along that seems better - other things fall by the wayside. We've really created a culture …Think about metrics around the flow of information and knowledge rather than financial metrics. Knowledge will create value if it moves across the organisation[1].

Jarvenpaa and Staples define collaborative technology as:

… computer-based system used to accomplish information activities such as accessing, searching, sharing, storing and publishing information in a computer network within a person's work unit/department/organization (i.e. internal information activities) as well as external to the person's organization (i.e. external activities)… such systems encourage sharing of ideas in a free-flowing manner as well as in a form of structured repositories …to exchange both information and knowledge (p. 130.)

Social media, then, are examples of collaborative technologies. Older or more traditional forms included listserves, intranets and email while the newer ones consist of social networking sites, Twitter and wikis.

It is important to distinguish between the most commonly used social media in general (such as blogging, twitter) and those implemented in organizations (such as wikis). The organizational lens should be used to discern social activities from more professional ones (for example, Facebook and its professional counterpart LinkedIn). Many organizations view social media as something they should be familiar with and that they should experiment with. However, once introduced, they tend to remain and along with their introduction, a number of expectations are created. A number of organizations justify this experimentation through one of the following reasons:

1. "We need to attract the new generation to come and work at our company"
2. "We need to keep up with new technologies"
3. "We must need it!?"

The next question tends to be: "What is it exactly?" There is a pressing need to demystify new social media and this needs to be done on at least two major axes: the technological axis (what are the tools, how do they work, what are they used for) and the human axis (the "engine" or the "intelligence" lies not in the tools but in the people who use them to network together). The latter notion, often referred to as "collective intelligence" (Brown and Lauder, 2000) to distinguish it from individual intelligence, also need to be clearly defined and distinguished from similar concepts such as synergy and team work.

In the early to mid-nineties, a number of researchers proposed a new perspective on understanding firms as social organizations (Kogut & Zander, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1996; Zander & Kogut, 1995) and several other authors (Boisot, 1995; Conner & Prahalad, 1996; Loasby, 1991; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Spender, 1996) rather than an institution that could be understand solely in terms of market conditions, costs and transactions. Kogut and Zander (1996) proposed "that a firm be understood as a social community specializing in the speed and efficiency in the creation and transfer of knowledge" (p.503). This perspective on the theory of the firm situates social media firmly at the centre of the knowledge flows that give rise to all three forms of intellectual capital, or value, forming the organization's knowledge assets. The three types of intellectual capital are: human capital, organizational capital and social capital.

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