Social Media for Online Collaboration in Firms and Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Participation in social networks has long been studied as a social phenomenon according to different theories. In particular, the notion of social capital highlights a person's benefit due to his relations with other persons, including family, colleagues, friends and generic contacts. It may be important both for the individuals that are able to accumulate large amounts, and for organizations. Nowadays, social networking systems bring many acquaintances online, both in the private and working spheres. Some systems are used both at home, for leisure goals, and on the work place, professionally. In the vast majority of cases, social networking platforms are still used without corporate blessing. However, several traditional information systems, such as CRMs and ERPs, have also been modified in order to include social aspects. This article shows the role of social capital in the participation in online social networking activities, in the various cases of Virtual Organizations, Virtual Teams, and online Networks of Practice. It describes the present situation, which is characterized by great promises and mixed initial results, and some possible prospects.

KEYWORDS

Network of Practices, Social Capital, Social Networks, Virtual Organizations, Virtual Teams

INTRODUCTION

The most important technological trend of the last ten years has been the rise of social networking systems to social phenomena involving billions of people all around the world, attracting users from several social groups, regardless of age, gender, education, or nationality.

Social networking systems blur the distinction between the private and working spheres, and users are known to use such systems both at home and on the work place both professionally and with recreational goals. Social networking systems can be equally used to organize a work meeting, a dinner with the colleagues or a birthday party with friends.

Nowadays, most popular social networking systems are the largest information systems accessible to the general public and, because of their neutrality regarding the public-private and the work-home axes, they often assume the role of feral systems.

For example, the chat systems that are embedded in social networking platforms are often the most practical way to contact a colleague to ask an urgent question, especially in technologically oriented companies.

Moreover, several traditional information systems have been modified in order to include social aspects and several organizations: (*i*) allow external social networking platforms to be used (e.g., Facebook was available for Microsoft and Apple employees before the general public launch), (*ii*) have

created an internal social networking platform (DiMicco & Millen, 2007), or (*iii*) allow other social platforms for specific purposes (Millen et al., 2006). However, in the vast majority of cases, social networking platforms are used without corporate blessing, maintaining their status as feral systems.

According to DiMicco (2008), most users that use social networking platforms for work purposes are mostly interested in accumulating social capital, either for career advancement or to gather support for their own projects inside the company. Given the close relation between professional usage of social media and social capital, in the following sections we discuss both the notion of social capital and how it affects participation in social media. Finally, we discuss how virtual teams and organizations benefit from social media.

RELATED WORK

The result of the interactions among the users in a social networking system is an Online Social Network, i.e., a special case of the more general concept of social network. A social network is defined as a set or sets of actors and the relations defined on them (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Social networks are typically studied using social network analysis, a discipline that focuses on the structural and topological features of the network. More recently, additional dimensions have been added to the traditional social network analytic approach (Monge and Contractor 2003; Borgatti and Foster 2003; Parkhe et al. 2006; Hoang and Antoncic 2003).

An important theoretical foundation for the analysis of participation in social networks is constituted by social capital. Social capital represents a person's benefit due to his relations with other persons, including family, colleagues, friends and generic contacts. The concept originated in studies about communities, to underline the importance of collective actions and the associated enduring relations of trust and cooperation, for the functioning of neighborhoods in large cities (Jacobs, 1961).

Social capital has been studied as a factor providing additional opportunities to some players in a competitive scenario, and, from this point of view, it has been studied in the context of firms (Backer, 1990), nations (Fukuyama, 1995) and geographic regions (Putnam, 1995). In this sense, social capital is defined as a third kind of capital that is brought in the competitive arena, along with financial capital, which includes machinery and raw materials, and human capital, which includes knowledge and skills. Moreover, the role of social capital in the development of human capital has been studied by Loury and Coleman (Loury, 1987; Coleman, 1988).

Social capital is typically studied: (*i*) by drawing a graph of connected people and their own resources, creating a connection between each player's resources and those of his closest contacts; or (*ii*) by analyzing social structures in their own right, and supposing that the network structure alone can be used to estimate some player's competitive advantage, at the social stance.

The size of the ego-centered social network is an important factor to estimate the social capital of one individual; however, the size alone does not provide enough information. According to Burt (1992) social capital is related with the number of non-redundant contacts and not directly with the simple number of contacts.

In fact, although information spreads rapidly among homogeneous, richly interconnected groups, Granovetter (1973) argues that new ideas and opportunities are introduced in the groups by contacts with people from outside the group. In order to explain this phenomenon, Granovetter distinguished among three types of ties: (*i*) strong ties, (*ii*) weak ties, and (*iii*) absent ties.

A quantitative distinction between strong and weak ties has been subject of debate, but intuitively weak ties are simple acquaintances, while strong ties are reserved for close friends and family. The "*absent ties*" indicate missing relations in the network. Burt capitalizes on Granovetter's insight, and

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