

Research on the Use of Social Software in the Workplace

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INTRODUCTION

In 2007, we launched an internal social network site for IBM employees designed to blur the boundaries of work and home, professional and personal, and business and fun. The website is called Beehive and is hosted by IBM Research as an experimental platform for studying and understanding the issues around adoption, usage, motivations, and impact of social networking in the workplace.

Beehive, shown in Figure 1, is a social networking website behind IBM's firewall. As with other social network sites, it supports the "friending" of other people, provides an individual profile page for each user, and incorporates content sharing in the form of photo and list sharing [8]. While we built the site to support sharing between colleagues, we did not build in limitations on the types of content that could be shared, for example whether or not the content was personal or professional in nature.

Figure 1 is a general model for conceptualizing how research is done on social software and is useful for understanding the areas in which we have focused our research agenda on Beehive [1-4, 6-9]. These four main areas are understanding adoption, usage patterns, motivations, and impact. This position paper gives a brief overview of a the key findings from the project on motivations (3) and impact on the workplace (4).

MOTIVATIONS FOR USING

Shortly after launching Beehive we conducted a usage analysis of the first several hundred early adopters and found evidence of relationship building and 'people sensemaking' throughout the site [1]. Employees were using the site to get to know their known colleagues better, particularly on a personal level, and to gain an understanding of who someone new is, performing what we term people sensemaking [2].

While this early analysis gave an indication of how people use Beehive, the analysis left a significant question unanswered: *why* are people using the site? What are their goals? To answer this question, we conducted in-depth interviews to understand users' motivations and thoughts on

their usage. We followed-up the qualitative analysis with a quantitative overview of the site to determine if patterns observed in interviews were replicated more broadly [3].



Figure 1. A Beehive profile.



Figure 2. Research on Social Software in the Workplace

This analysis revealed that patterns of use and user motivations differ from users of other social software tools. First, within the protected, closed off environment of the intranet, employees choose to reach out on Beehive to new people rather than only connecting to those they know, which is different than behavior found on Facebook [11]. Employees also share details of their personal life on Beehive which has not been found with any significant

frequency in other enterprise social software tools, such as intranet social bookmarking and blogging [10].

By summarizing interview transcripts and considering users' value and benefit statements, three main themes of user motivations emerged. Beyond the desire to share with colleagues on a personal level, which we anticipated would be a primary value for most Beehive users, we identified two additional motivations: career advancement and the ability to convince others to support ideas and projects. Employees use Beehive to present themselves professionally and to network with those they believe can assist them in their career goals within IBM. And those looking to promote a project or idea use the site's features to advertise and gather support from other users for their plans.

IMPACT ON THE WORKPLACE

In related research, Ellison et al. found correlations between greater "bridging" and "bonding" social capital with greater usage of Facebook on a college campus [5], meaning that the ties to one's immediate and extended friends are stronger with greater use of Facebook. In our latest research, we conducted a similar analysis of Beehive users to determine if employees also experience greater social capital with greater use of the site.

We found that even with limited use of Beehive, over a relatively short amount of time, there are associations between types of usage and these different types of social capital. When someone is using Beehive for meeting new contacts, they report a greater interest in making these types of contacts at the company in general. When someone is using Beehive for keeping up with known colleagues, both in their workgroup and in their extended network of loose ties, they report having closer ties with their immediate network (bonding social capital), a higher sense of citizenship (willingness to help the greater good of the company), and greater access to both new people and expertise within the company. And finally, the more intensely someone uses Beehive (meaning more frequent visits and stronger associations with the community on the site) the higher they report their social capital is, across all measures. They have closer bonds to their network, they have a greater willingness to contribute to the company, they have a greater interest in connecting globally, have greater access to new people, and a greater ability to access expertise.

In this preliminary analysis we cannot claim a causal relation between the use of Beehive and these social capital measures, but we see these results indicative of a relationship between use and these measurements.

CONCLUSION

As more employees use social software, both inside and outside of the company, to exchange and share with their colleagues, friends and family, there is an increasing need

to understand how the use of these sites changes relationships, enhances our understandings of one another, and alters the workplace social dynamic. This position paper is an overview of our initial evidence that a social network site inside the enterprise can play an important role in helping employees maintain and develop connections within the company, support networking and career goals, and potentially increase employee social capital. These results lay the groundwork for determining the value of social network site features within the organization.

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