Design and Adoption of Social Collaboration Software within Businesses

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Abstract

Social networking and collaboration sites are having a large impact on people's personal lives. These same applications, similar functions and related experiences are being adopted within businesses. This special interest group will address the issues around social collaboration software in the business setting. What is the value for the business and its users? How do you measure success? What strategic design and user experience issues are key for successful adoption? What roles do user experience professionals play in this type of social system?

Keywords

Social collaboration, social computing

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.3 Organizational impacts

Introduction

Social networking and other social collaboration sites have exploded in popularity in recent years and is arguably one of the most significant ways in which computing is affecting people today. Facebook has seen over 132 million unique visits per month (and 43 million members [1]), and similar sites such as

MySpace (117 million/month) and Friendster (37 million/month) continue to show impressive growth [2].

Furthermore, the benefits users perceive from these sites have likewise broadened. Rather than just being a means for establishing and maintaining social contacts, these sites have evolved to provide:

- enhanced feeling of connectedness via sharing of personal information and pictures
- employment opportunities
- social activism
- community building and mobilization
- rapid sharing of information

For example, many perceive these and similar sites as crucial for identifying and securing new job opportunities; so much so that they may have precipitated a decline in traditional job search sites [3]. Studies on how these sites can rapidly disseminate information have lead to Facebook and Twitter being integrated into emergency alert system at Pacific University [4]. Governmental leaders have begun considering the impact of ideological spread, both positive and negative [5]. Schools are beginning to look at how these sites may revolutionize education. Social networking sites may change classrooms [6], and research has gone as far as to suggest that these types of sites can contribute to psychological well-being, such as improving self-esteem [7].

Given the impact, both measured and perceived, of social networking/collaboration sites, their penetration into organizations, businesses and professional settings seems inevitable. The possible benefits seem numerous. Medium and large size companies especially benefit from strong connections between employees, ranging from finding the right expertise rapidly to identifying cross-organization sales opportunities. These benefits may even be more pronounced when "weak ties" [13], beyond the employee's immediate team, are made. Employees have a vested interest in building their internal reputation, and explore advancement opportunities. Increasing personal connectivity between employees could help job satisfaction and retention, and community building could aid in rapid problem resolution. New employees could be integrated into the company quicker. Communication and information sharing, a priority and challenge for many companies, could improve [13].

While businesses have taken note of the marketing and PR opportunities manifest in external sites [7], the use of such social networking within a given company or organization (e.g., on secure intranets) is still relatively in infancy. In fact, there may be some question as to whether such adoption would be of a net benefit to a company. Surveys have already suggested that social networking may be a distraction to workers (e.g., 8% report spending 30 minutes or more of their 8-hour workday using their personal networking site [9]). Sharing of personal photos among employees, for example, may provide some indirect benefit to a company, but may also be perceived as a distracter from productivity without a direct measurable benefit to the bottom line. Users of Facebook have found that managing friend requests and messages can become a considerable time demand [10].

Social networking may not always deliver on its promise. Students may use Facebook to learn more about people met offline, rather than meeting new

people online [11]. In a business setting, this may translate to a strengthening of team relationships, at the cost of a possible reduction of chances for "new contacts". Reputation management within a company may not be cut and dried, as professors' presence on Facebook did not influence student's perception of them (one third of students felt professors should not be on Facebook [12]).

Businesses may find other barriers to adoption. Informal surveys have shown that users of Facebook seem to cluster around age 21, with a reduction in use with user age [8]. Studies have found different usage rates among different ethnic groups [7]. Diverse companies may find varying interest in and experience with social collaboration, especially across geographies and cultures.

Finally, as is commonly the case, the specific strategy and design of the social networking system is likely to have a large impact on success. Creating separate sites within the company to recreate familiar look and feel of external social networking sites must be balanced with integration with existing systems with similar purposes. For example, should offering employees the ability to post personal photos be integrated with an existing employee directory, or created as a separate application? Should internal social networking sites have their own "inbox", or be completely integrated with existing e-mail systems?

We believe that a focus on social collaboration within enterprises from the greater HCI community could be of great benefit. Not only can we assist enterprises in targeting areas of maximum positive impact and creating the best possible designs, but enterprises also offer an interesting new application of social collaboration with several interesting research possibilities.

Topics

The actual topics covered in the SIG will reflect the interests of the participants, but these are what we expect to be discussed.

- What is the business value of social collaboration? (Enable employees to make new contacts? Strengthen existing ties? Get answers quickly? Take a company's opinion "pulse"? Internal communications?) What are the risks?

- What are the best integration strategies and design approaches? Consider the merits of a separate social networking system vs. integration with existing systems. Discuss companies creating new social networking systems vs. incorporating existing systems.

- What social collaboration features are most important in business settings? How is this different from other settings? How is this the same?

- What are the strategies for adoption? Should social networking succeed or fail on its own? Should there be an aggressive marketing plan? Should companies force participation? How do you measure adoption and related factors like, success, risk and productivity?

- What is the role of user experience in social collaboration adoption? What interaction and user interface design patterns are evolving for this class of use cases? How much of the user

experience should be designed up front and how much should evolve and/or be driven by the community itself? Should we evolve our user experience methods for this environment? If so, how?

Special interest group process
The special interest group session may include:

- A very short presentation on the topic of social collaboration software.
- A whole-group "physical" activity to get attendees engaged in the session and stimulate discussion.
- Breaking up into smaller groups based on the interests of the attendees, with reports back to the whole group.
- Discussion of follow-up actions to the SIG.

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