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Enterprise social media at work: web-based solutions for employee engagement

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Introduction of enterprise social media at work

Social media is no longer a fad but a strategic asset! Organizations who have realized this fact are increasingly using social networking sites for recruitment and employer branding purposes. However, it is time to move ahead. Today, social media can be used to engage not only customers but also internal stakeholders, the employees. Debates on pros and cons of social media use as an internal workplace tool are slowly fading away and social media is smoothly making its place at workplaces. With the rise of Enterprise 2.0 (McAfee, 2006), many companies have upgraded their intranets to “social intranets” by incorporating features of Web 2.0. Applications such as Facebook at work, Microsoft Yammer, IBM Connections are helping organizations create their own social networks. These private social networking tools, also called enterprise social media (Leonardi *et al.*, 2013), usually offer similar networking features as that of a public social networking site. However, the membership and access on these enterprise networks is limited to organizational members within the enterprise boundaries.

Engaging employees through enterprise social media

As organizations become globally dispersed, increasing the physical proximity between employees, enterprise social media can be used as a workplace tool to deal with challenges of employee coordination, communication and collaboration. Employees are able to connect with their colleagues not only within their teams but also organization-wide spread across the globe, thus expanding their social networks. By offering features such as blogs, discussion forums, instant messaging, tagging and so on, it creates a dynamic social networking environment for employees' interaction within organization with potential benefits for engagement and collaboration. This allows them to share ideas and solution to solve work and non-work-related issues on a common platform. Also, it is an easy and effective way for newcomer socialization because new employees can easily connect to their colleagues, give-and-receive feedback and support. By the virtue of being connected to diverse members across different teams, departments and countries, employees are able to expand and create heterogeneity in their social networks. Discussion forums, blogs and webinars allows them to share new ideas and provide valuable feedback on organizational policies. Employees can also join various online communities of practice (CoP) (Hanson-Smith, 2013), depending upon their interest, where they can interact and discuss subject matter experts. These CoP may vary across a range of activities from formal communities such as those of software developers, or economists, etc. to informal communities such as health, sports and travel for greater employee engagement. Also,

being enterprise-wide, these platforms can be used by top management to connect with employees at all levels in the form of CEO talks or video chats, thus overcoming hierarchical boundaries and power dynamics in internal communications. This can be a great source of motivation as employees feel involved and valued. Thus, enterprise social media is a strategic tool for employee engagement as it empowers employees to:

- connect to diverse people across the organization expanding their social network;
- share and disseminate new ideas and solutions for existing problems;
- quickly resolves problems because everyone on the network knows “who knows what”;
- involves a large diverse group for participative decision making; and
- helps in newcomer socialization process.

How organizations are actually walking the talk

IT services and solutions company, Tech Mahindra launched “MyBeatPlus”, an enterprise social media initiative to achieve its vision of promoting a “One Tech Mahindra” culture among more than 80,000 employees (Kar, 2016). This internal virtual platform allowed employees to connect with each other, as well as their clients. It created a collaborative work culture where employees could share ideas, suggestions and interact with their top management. It helped people to join interest groups, where they could learn from peers and also engage with subject matter experts. All this resulted in increased employee engagement levels with improved communication and collaboration among employees. On similar lines, Lenovo, a China-based computer company, improved engagement levels with an internal in-house social media platform called “Lenovo Social Champions”, where employees and C-suite executives shared and discussed about company products, branding, feedback (Pathak, 2015). Such social media technology made employees feel empowered over other traditional workplace communication media such as e-mails. Louwers (2016) shared how Yammer, an enterprise social networking tool became a revolutionary tool for internal communications and drastically increased engagement levels for over 9,000 employees at Inflight Services at KLM Royal Dutch Airlines when crew members could share real-time feedback with back-office staff for real-time problem-solving. Other examples include Royal Bank of Scotland which deployed private social media network named “RBS One Heart” to initiate internal communication for employee retention purposes (Landers and Goldberg, 2013).

Employee reactions to enterprise social media initiatives

Adding an enterprise social software to the company’s list of workplace technologies is only the first step and would add no value unless employees use them actively in their day-to-day work lives. Employees should feel free to connect to their colleagues at work for work and non-work related matters, without the fear of being monitored by a big brother, thus creating a sense of belongingness. Organization can benefit from their wisdom of crowd only when employees feel psychologically safe to share their true opinions, feel free to provide not only positive but also negative feedback. Because it is this negative feedback that allows areas of improvement. This happens when organizations create an open and transparent culture where employees realize that their voices are not only heard but also valued and acted upon. Hence, engaging employees on such platforms largely depends upon the level of organizational support and encouragement. Organizations can increase employee participation on their social networks by:

- convincing employees that you genuinely want them to share;
- allowing informal employee conversations to make friends at work;

- making opportunities for constructive feedback and challenging views; and
- defining what is appropriate and what is inappropriate.

Implications for human resource managers

Keeping in mind the two types of social media – public and private – organizations need to differentiate between their external and internal social media strategies. This can be done by:

- creating a social media team to design and implement a social media strategy and allocating budget requirements for enterprise social media software package;
- clearly stating the dos and don'ts for employees comprehensively for both internal and external social media policy;
- devising an internal social media policy which is much more open than the external social media policy to get candid and genuine employee feedback;
- linking social media strategy with human resource management policies and procedures such as reward and recognition, learning and development, grievances and termination to name a few;
- encouraging employees to voice new ideas, opinions and suggestions by reward and recognition schemes;
- engaging employees by organizing events for online discussions, innovative idea sharing; and
- involving top management on internal social media platforms to encourage employee participation.

Conclusion

Organizations can go a long way by using enterprise social media technologies for employee engagement and collaboration objectives. They need to realize that enterprise social media is not only a social networking platform for their employees but also a great way to connect and involve employees in organizational purposes such as idea generation, problem-solving and participative decision-making and, hence, can be a strategic employee engagement initiative. However, it takes a lot more than mere investing in social media work tools – organizations need to build a “culture of openness and transparency”, where employees not only “feel free” to share ideas and opinions but also “feel happy and involved” with high-touch points in their entire employment experience. Only then can we reap returns on our investment.

Keywords:

Employee engagement,
Social media strategy,
Enterprise social media,
Internal social media,
Social intranet

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