Adaptive use of social networking applications in contemporary organizations: Examining the motivations of Gen Y cohorts

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ABSTRACT

With the entry of the contemporary generation (Gen Y) into the workforce, organizations are interested in leveraging Gen Y's technological preferences when designing their information systems. Specifically, motivated by Gen Y's dependence on Social Networking Applications (SNAs) in their private lives, organizations have initiated the implementation of Corporate Social Networks (CSNs) to facilitate closer collaboration and knowledge sharing within organizations. However, these initiatives have not been received with the expected enthusiasm from Gen Y employees. To better understand this apparent anomaly, the current study explores the Gen Y cohort's intended adaptive use of SNAs in organizational settings, as CSNs. This study uses an enriched Delphi technique to examine the perceptions and concerns of members of Gen Y regarding use of CSNs. In addition, employing a structured qualitative approach and contextualizing the needs hierarchy theory to the specific case of Gen Y employees, this study identifies six organizational requirements for successfully implementing CSNs. This work extends the literature on adaptive use of Enterprise 2.0 systems and delineates a set of useful implications for managers intending to implement such systems for Gen Y employees.

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1. Introduction

Science and technology revolutionize our lives, but memory, tradition and myth frame our response.

Arthur Schlesinger (Historian)

The emergence of numerous Web 2.0 tools is enabling users to organize, share, and collaborate on a continual basis (Nabil, 2013). Social Networking Applications (SNAs), which facilitate online social network communities for sharing user-created contents, are perhaps the most popular of these tools (Kim, Kim, & Nam, 2010). SNAs are defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or a semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; p. 8). SNAs not only offer users functionalities for identity management but also help them keep in touch with others (Richter & Koch, 2008). When SNAs are incorporated within the organizational fabric, they are termed Corporate Social Networks (CSNs)

and fall under the generic classification of Enterprise 2.0 systems (Anderson, 2007; Leidner, Koch, & Gonzalez, 2010). Despite the emergence of SNAs as CSNs, their adoption and use within organizations is still in a nascent stage. Hence, an examination of issues related to the use of SNAs within organizations as CSNs will certainly be of value to both research and practice.

A recent study found that the U.S. labor market is currently dominated by Gen Y employees[1] and that two-thirds of these employees expressed a desire to leave their organization by 2020, primarily because of a misalignment between their personal preferences and the organizational strategies (Deloitte, 2016). To minimize employee attrition and create an encouraging climate for their employees, organizations need to better understand Gen Y's motivations so that they can closely align the personal preferences of this majority employee segment with the goals of the organization.

It is widely known that Gen Y is heavily dependent on SNAs (such as different social networking websites, platforms, and mobile apps) for their routine social interactions. Generational Cohort Theory (GCT) suggests that an individual's values, beliefs, attitudes, and inclinations are impacted and shaped by major historical events and changes in the society (Inglehart, 1997). Leveraging GCT,

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[1] These are employees born in 1980 or later.

researchers predicted that for contemporary technology-savvy digital natives, SNAs such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest would serve as natural extensions to their social lives (see Aral, Dellarocas, & Godes, 2013; Dudezert, Boughzala, & Mounoud, 2009; He, Zha, & Ling, 2013). Because of their familiarity with the use of SNAs in their personal lives, members of Gen Y are also expected to use such tools in their professional lives. This use is, in turn, expected to contribute to organizational productivity through better knowledge flows for open collaboration and innovation (see Chesbrough & Appleyard, 2007; Constant, Keisler, & Sproull, 1994; Cramton, 2001; De Hertogh, Viaene, & Dedene, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), and it can be a means to unlock tremendous financial value (Chui, Dewhurst, & Pollak 2013). In view of these expectations, organizations are increasingly incorporating SNAs as the preferred medium for professional interactions to better suit the needs of the Gen Y workforce. However, recent studies show that the anticipated workplace enthusiasm for CSNs has not been seen among employees, including the Gen Yers (members of Gen Y), which raises practical concerns about their implementation, adaptation, and consequent use within organizations (see De Hertogh et al., 2011; Leidner et al., 2010; Li, 2015) . Hence, from a business standpoint, it is important to understand the contextual factors surrounding Gen Y's intentions to use CSNs. Studies in this area can help managers design better strategies for successfully implementing CSN projects, thereby contributing to the performance of these implementations.

From a research perspective, despite a wealth of studies devoted to understanding technology adoption and its use, it is unclear why Gen Yers, who regularly use SNAs in their personal social lives, are less enthusiastic about using CSNs in their professional lives. This apparent anamoly calls for a nuanced theoretical understanding of Gen Y's beliefs and motivations regarding use of such systems (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Recent literature on adaptive use intention (AUI) offers some insights for understanding this phenomenon (Chandra, Srivastava, & Theng, 2012). AUI is the intention to use a technology in a setting different from the one for which it was initially designed.[2] However, our understanding of AUI has not yet been sufficiently developed in the information management literature. In contrast, generational literature shows that it is useful to look at specific generational attributes as a means to examine associated phenomenon. Thus, the integration of generational diversity with the phenomenon of adaptive use of technology adoption should be theorized to better inform theories related to technology adoption and use for emerging contexts such as CSNs.

It is plausible that specific attributes of Gen Y influence their AUI (or lack thereof) to use CSNs (see Chandra et al., 2012). According to the generational literature, Gen Y has very different work beliefs and value systems than baby boomers and Gen X (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010), and generational cohorts can influence the ways in which organizations handle work–life fusion issues related to the use of new technologies (Haeger & Lingham, 2014). We posit that these differences need to be suitably factored into Enterprise 2.0 technology implementations for them to be successful (Boughzala, 2012; Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007; Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004). Thus, integration of contextual factors associated with CSN technology and the generational specificity of the users requires an exploratory lens to obtain a richer understanding of the consequent use of the CSNs by such users (see Johns, 2006). Clearly, deciphering the factors that influence Gen Y's AUI for Enterprise 2.0 technology is crucial for businesses and will

also advance technology adoption research. Hence, grounding our exploratory study in *generational cohort theory* (GCT) and taking an *adaptive use* perspective, we seek to identify some of the key considerations for successfully implementing Enterprise 2.0 systems, specifically, CSNs. Further, we situate the adaptive use perspective in the *needs hierarchy theory* to better appreciate the motivations of Gen Y users. Because this is one of the first qualitative exploratory studies on the subject, we employ an enriched Delphi technique to examine the following two broad research questions:

RQ1: How does Gen Y perceive the use of CSN applications in a corporate scenario?

RQ2: What are Gen Y's key concerns regarding use of CSN applications in a corporate scenario?

We expect that this study will contribute to the literature on the adaptive use of technology by contextualizing it to Gen Y users, thereby addressing the call for context-specific theorizing (see Bamberger, 2008; Johns, 2006). We also expect that the findings from this study will provide practical guidelines for organizational managers who are implementing Enterprise 2.0 systems such as CSNs, which are a major challenge in the current socially networked environment (see Aral et al., 2013; He et al., 2013).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we describe the background theory and literature, and in Section 3, we describe the research method we employed. In Section 4, the results and discussion section, we propose a framework for the adaptive use of Enterprise 2.0 by Gen Y users. Finally, in Section 5, we discuss some limitations and implications of this research.

Fig. 1 depicts the research framework for this study, highlighting the practical and theoretical gaps it addresses.

2. Background literature

2.1. Gen Y use and work values regarding Enterprise 2.0 systems

In a recent study examining the financial contribution of CSN solution implementations in 60 leading global organizations, SelectMinds (2008)[3] found that private, secure CSNs can provide substantial savings through a better connected workforce (Sena & Sena, 2008). CSNs are an efficient way to link remotely located people with specific competency domains in large organizations to create and maintain sustainable relationships. Several companies, including IBM, Disney, Accenture, and Redbull, are currently experimenting with CSNs. The social aspect of CSN applications makes them an attractive option for knowledge-intensive organizations (Richter & Riemer, 2009). However, despite the anticipated gains, a few recent studies have reported that the expected workplace enthusiasm for CSNs is not to be found among Gen Y employees, which raises concerns about the implementation, adaptation, and consequent use of CSNs within organizations (see De Hertogh et al., 2011; Leidner et al., 2010). To better understand such implementations, we ground our study in GCT in order to accurately incorporate the motivations of Gen Y users.

The two major factors that distinguish generations are birth rates and the specific events of the times (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007). GCT maintains that historical incidents of national/global significance shake the foundations of existing social orders and value systems and give birth to new generational cohorts (Inglehart, 1997). A generational cohort can be characterized as a group of people born during the same period and having experienced similar historical events at critical stages of their development (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Ryder, 1965). Each generation is known to be affected by several contextual factors, including

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[2] In the context of this research, corporate use of social networking tools, as CSNs, provides a very different context for SNAs, which were initially designed to be used by individuals for personal communication and messaging.

[3] SelectMinds is a leading provider of Corporate Social Networking (CSN) solutions that was recently acquired by Oracle Corporation.