



Email-free collaboration: An exploratory study on the formation of new work habits among knowledge workers



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ABSTRACT

Social collaboration technologies have rapidly spread across organizations, offering a unique opportunity to improve the exchange of knowledge among employees, especially in distributed work environments. The increasing popularity of social-collaboration tools as an employee-oriented communication channel, inevitably raises questions about the future of email as its intensive use by knowledge workers is more and more perceived as being inefficient and unproductive. Through a quantitative case study methodology, this study seeks to explore the role played by the notion of habit in explaining employee knowledge sharing capability for firms implementing social collaborative practices in the context of no-email initiatives. Data collected within a large international IT services company, which is among the first firms having made such shift, were used to test the developed conceptual model. The findings suggest that habit is positively influenced by relative advantage and perceived ease of use while relative advantage was found to positively impact knowledge sharing capability. Besides, habit moderates the relationships between three attributes (relative advantage, perceived ease of use, and compatibility to a lesser extent) and knowledge sharing capability. Theoretical and practical implications developed from these findings are then discussed.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, a new light has been shed upon the concept of collaboration as business organizations have started to harness concepts from the web 2.0 to enhance their workers' interpersonal communication and collaboration capabilities (Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014). This phenomenon hinges on the development of a new class of technology, enterprise social-collaborative technology, which supports the creation and exchange of user-generated content through the use of blogs, wikis, social networking features, social tagging, and microblogging (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). Over a surprisingly brief period of time, the use of social collaborative tools has grown from limited experimentation to mainstream practices. According to the global consultancy McKinsey & Company, 83% of companies report the use of social-collaboration technologies in their organization (Bughin & Chui, 2013). Market analysts estimate the worldwide enterprise social networks and collaborative

technologies market to grow from 1.0 billion in 2012 to 2.7 billion dollars by 2017 (IDC, 2013). Aside from a technological breakthrough, this represents a shift in the way people feel, think, and behave (e.g., Castells, 2013), with implications that are not yet well understood by communication and information systems researchers. This study aims at raising the awareness of researchers and practitioners about the broader nature of the social-collaboration phenomenon as it embodies a work behavior paradigm shift rather than being a mere question of IS/IT adoption.

Furthermore, faced with an urgent need to enhance internal collaboration and realizing the potential offered by social-collaboration technologies, some companies have started seriously questioning the usage of internal email as their main communication tool for employees (Johri, 2011). Indeed, knowledge workers receive massive amounts of emails everyday which results in an *information overload* that tends to decrease their individual performance (Evaristo, Adams, & Curley, 2015). Whereas email is a targeted communication channel that spreads out information in multiple inboxes, social-collaboration technologies offer topic-specific collaboration spaces in which information aggregates through the input of its users. Subsequently, knowledge exchange is expected to be particularly enhanced in distributed work environments (Beck, Pahlke, & Seebach, 2014). However, while email

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is not calibrated for efficiently circulating knowledge throughout the organization, its usage is deeply entrenched in today's organizational practices. In order for new forms of collaboration to take place, new working habits have to form and develop. Benefiting from the momentum offered by a company-wide email-free initiative, this study seeks to explore the key role played by the notion of habit in explaining knowledge sharing behaviors in firms implementing social collaborative practices in the context of no-email initiatives. This research builds on the work of Limayem and Hirt (2003); Limayem, Hirt, & Cheung, 2007) about the importance of habits in the adoption of new technologies. No-email initiatives being still at a nascent adoption stage, it appeared pertinent to narrow down our investigation to a single case to allow an in-depth examination and understanding of the role of habit in explaining how individuals collaborate without emails. Besides, the purposeful selection of a case that is highly theoretically relevant is a means to ensure the clear delineation of the context (and thus theoretical boundaries) within which the developed theoretical model may apply (Yin, 2003).

In the next section the theoretical background is provided. This is followed by the presentation of the developed theoretical model as well as the associated hypotheses. Then, research methodology, data analysis and results are presented. The paper wraps up with the main contributions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical background

Collaboration occurs when two or more individuals who work together, support each other by sharing their ideas, knowledge or competencies with the purpose of accomplishing a given task (Hargrove, 1998). Such activity is supported by electronic technologies that help people coordinate their work with others by sharing information or knowledge (Doll & Deng, 2001). The proliferation of collaborative technologies is highly correlated to the development of globally distributed teams, a phenomenon that results from the distribution of business processes across firms and geographies (Bentley et al., 1997). The activity of such working groups is supported by workflow systems that are specifically designed to support transactional processes such as pre-defined information flows (Basu & Kumar, 2002). Yet these tools are inevitably poorly adapted to the collective exchange of unstructured information. Knowledge workers are often faced with situations they have never encountered before, hence the need for collaboration systems that efficiently help identify, disseminate, and retrieve knowledge within work groups (Doll & Deng, 2001).

2.1. The rise of social-collaboration technologies

In order to fulfill their employees' collaboration needs, organizations have started experimenting with social-collaboration technologies that apply web 2.0 principles to corporate settings. Social media, a prominent avatar of this transformation, include features such as blogs, microblogs, social networking sites, wikis, and video- or content-sharing sites (Piskorki & McCall, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). When used within the boundaries of an organization, this technology allows the broadcast of employee-generated content, therefore enhancing a company's internal communication capabilities (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013; Ngai et al., 2015). The second addition of social media platforms is to allow better employee connectedness through the creation and regular activation of social ties, ultimately leading to a company's enhanced social capital (see Coleman, 1988). At IBM and HP, the implementation of an enterprise social network has led to greater employee connectedness

because it supports the development of new social ties as well as reactivates existing ones (DiMicco et al., 2008; Brzozowski, 2009). This results in a unique capacity for employees of these large IT firms to identify and reach out experts beyond their own work-group, context, or country (Steinfeld, Dimicco, Ellison, & Lampe, 2009). By extension, Ferron, Frassoni, Massa, Napolitano, & Setti (2010) found that employees exposed to a social networking site reported greater social capital. We note that the very nature of social media, as a broadcast medium that emphasizes on the public access of information as well as social connectedness, questions the use of recipient-targeted technologies such as email, especially in a context in which group coordination is more needed than ever.

2.2. The question of email inefficiencies

Email usage is deeply entrenched into the communication habits of employees within organizations. It has been associated with higher task accomplishment and life enrichment (Huang, Lin, & Lin, 2011) and has also given workers the ability to work anywhere at any time (Barley, Meyerson, & Grodal, 2011). However, the influence of email communication on employees has been equivocal. Studies have indicated the negative effects of email use such as deficient information quality, information overload and even decreased job satisfaction (Russell, Purvis, & Banks, 2007; Soucek & Moser, 2010). They have also highlighted the inferior ability of email communication in allowing synchronous communication (i.e. fast exchange of messages) and also deficiencies in allowing trust-based relations, compared to video conferencing where facial and emotional reactions can be more easily deciphered and interpreted (Rockmann & Northcraft, 2008; Walther & Parks, 2002). The collaboration inefficiencies resulting from email usage are particularly salient in a group setting. Contrary to other mainstream collaborative technologies (such as conferencing systems, whiteboards, knowledge repositories, and, more recently, enterprise social media), email does not provide a public arena in which communal knowledge can be built, and shared meanings established (Bjørn and Ngwenyama, 2009). Consequently, employees receive massive amounts of emails every day, a trend that will likely continue to grow (Radicati, 2014) and lead to even more productivity loss because of the work interruptions this entails (Barley et al., 2011; Jackson, Dawson, & Wilson, 2001). This was highlighted during a five-day long experiment that took place within a large scientific organization. The trial revealed that when emails were completely turned-off, workers focused longer on their tasks, multitasked less, and experienced lower stress (Mark, Volda, Cardello, 2012).

2.3. Knowledge sharing in collaborative environments

Contrary to email, social-collaboration technologies offer "a unique opportunity to improve the exchange of knowledge among employees, especially in a distributed environment" (Beck et al., 2014). According to the knowledge-based view of the firm, knowledge is a scarce asset and the ability to manage it determines an organization's competitiveness (Grant, 1996). Thus, the effective exchange, reconfiguration, and interpretation of knowledge among employees are of critical importance (Tsai, 2001). Knowledge sharing refers to the provision of task information and know-how to help and collaborate with others to solve problems, develop new ideas, or implement policies or procedures (Cummings, 2004; Pulakos, Dorsey, & Borman, 2003). In line with growing emphasis on employee-generated content, social platforms allow online knowledge sharing to shift from a centralized to a decentralized process as individuals can broadcast information whenever they want in both formal and informal ways (Kane & Fichman, 2009). This turns the dynamic of knowledge exchange processes into a "continuous com-

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