



## What's in IT for employees? Understanding the relationship between use and performance in enterprise social software



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### ABSTRACT

Despite enterprise social software platforms' (ESSPs) widespread diffusion in recent years, the impact of such systems on employee performance is not clear. This study explores the link between ESSP use and its potential performance impacts. Our findings show that ESSP use influences employee performance in two ways: through improved task performance and employee innovation. We also show that task equivocality moderates the relationship between ESSP use and employee performance outcomes, with ESSP use having a stronger impact on the performance of non-routine tasks. Finally, we show that using ESSPs for connecting within teams has a stronger effect on task performance, while using ESSP for connecting across teams has a stronger effect on employee innovation. These results can help researchers and practitioners better understand how ESSP use affects employee performance and the conditions best suited to achieve these performance outcomes in an enterprise setting.

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### Introduction

Social software applications – such as wikis, weblogs, and social networking sites (SNS) – have recently attracted organizational researchers' attention (e.g., Kane and Fichman, 2009; Kane et al., 2014a). The impressive growth of public social web sites, like Facebook and Twitter, has pressurized organizations to take their employees' changing communication behavior into account (von Krogh, 2012) and to provide them with intra-organizational social software applications (Healey, 2012). Currently, organizations are increasingly adopting a diverse mix of organizational social software applications (Chan and Morgan, 2011; Chui et al., 2012; Haefliger et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2010; Kiron et al., 2013; Majchrzak et al., 2009), which we refer to collectively as enterprise social software platforms (ESSPs).

Despite its impressive adoption growth, it is not clear whether or how ESSPs positively influence performance. Previous research has demonstrated that the link between information technology (IT) use and performance should not be taken for granted and can be influenced by complex factors. For example, IT will not have a positive performance impact if it goes unused (Devaraj and Kohli, 2003). Other research has suggested that the fit between task and technology is an important predictor of performance (Goodhue and Thompson, 1995). Different types of technologies may also have different types

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of outcomes (Kane and Alavi, 2007). The importance of the link between IT use and performance may be particularly salient for ESSPs, since many IT managers are also skeptical about ESSPs' benefit for employees and cannot truly justify their adoption (McAfee, 2009b). In addition, ESSPs can also be applied to a number of different types of tasks (Kane et al., 2014a), making the questions of task and environmental fit more complex. Organizations should therefore first develop a solid understanding of a technology's potential business benefits before adopting it or advocating its use (Denyer et al., 2011).

This study's research question therefore is: *How and under what conditions does ESSP use lead to performance benefits for employees?* More specifically, our research objectives are (1) to empirically validate a positive relationship between ESSP use and individual employee performance, (2) to investigate how employees' task equivocality (i.e. task non-routineness) moderates the relationships between the two, and (3) to determine whether different types of use (i.e. intra-team vs. inter-team use) have differential effects on individual employee performance (i.e. task performance vs. innovative performance). We study the relationship between ESSP use and the individual employee performance by means of a survey among 491 employees of an international media company headquartered in the UK. The company's ESSP had been in place for four years, with an adoption rate of more than 75% at the time of data collection (April/May 2013).

Our findings provide compelling evidence that ESSP use influences both employees' task performance and innovative performance and also reveal a far more nuanced story. We find that inter-team use has a greater impact on performance outcomes when used to support high equivocality tasks. Further, task equivocality moderates the relationship between intra-team use and performance outcomes, but we only find evidence of this moderating effect on innovative performance impact. Finally, intra-team use of ESSPs has a greater effect on task performance, while inter-team ESSP use has a greater effect on innovative performance. All these findings not only demonstrate the strong relationship between ESSP use and employee performance, but may also help managers better understand the conditions under which ESSPs are likely to have the greatest impact on performance.

## Theory

### *The use-performance relationship*

The information systems (IS) literature recognized the need to investigate the relationship between IS use and its performance impacts decades ago (e.g., DeLone and McLean, 1992; Devaraj and Kohli, 2003; Keen and Morton, 1978). Studies relating IS use on the individual level with individual-level outcome variables have, however, often yielded mixed results. The observed use-performance relationship ranges from strong, positive relations (e.g., Rai et al., 2002) to no, or only weak, relationships (e.g., Iivari, 2005). It has long been acknowledged that system use is central in the use-performance relationship (e.g., Trice and Treacy, 1988). Doll and Torkzadeh (1998) state that: "System-use is a pivotal construct in the system-to-value chain that links upstream research on the causes of system success with downstream research on the organizational impacts of information technology" (p. 171).

### *The use-performance relationship in enterprise social software use*

Organizations' increasing adoption of social software led to empirical research on the enterprise social software phenomenon and its business impact. Since research surmised that, in an enterprise context, the practices and benefits of social software would probably be very different (Richter et al., 2011) from those of social software use in the private realm, we do not take the latter into account (e.g., Boyd and Ellison, 2007; DiMicco and Millen, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2009). We draw on the work of Leonardi et al. (2013, p. 2) when defining ESSPs as "[w]eb-based platforms that allow workers to (1) communicate messages with specific coworkers or broadcast messages to everyone in the organization; (2) explicitly indicate or implicitly reveal particular coworkers as communication partners; (3) post, edit, and sort text and files linked to themselves or others; and (4) view the messages, connections, text, and files communicated, posted, edited and sorted by anyone else in the organization at any time of their choosing." IBM's social software platform *IBM Connections*, the *Jive* platform, and Microsoft's *SharePoint 2010 Communities* are typical products in this segment (please refer to Drakos et al. (2013), or Koplowitz (2011) for recent market overviews of ESSPs). Please note that this research endeavor focuses on company-internal social software use and its impact.<sup>3</sup>

Various authors have identified various business impacts merging from different enterprise social software tools, for example, collaboration and communication, knowledge management, innovation, customer relationship management, training (Andriole, 2010), cost and time savings (Denyer et al., 2011), better recruiting, higher morale, better employee engagement (Leidner et al., 2010), improve work processes, collaboration, and knowledge reuse (Majchrzak et al., 2006). Others identify benefits for employees, such as potential contacts (Farzan et al., 2009; Steinfield et al., 2009), improved information sharing, enhanced co-ordination, and better possibilities for employees to express concerns (da Cunha and Orlikowski, 2008), community building, reputation building, sharing, feedback giving and receiving (Jackson et al., 2007), access to knowledge,

<sup>3</sup> For a broader background on enterprise social software and its differentiation from traditional knowledge management, please refer to Fulk and Yuan (2013), Leonardi et al. (2013), and Treem and Leonardi (2012).

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