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A problem-centered analysis of enterprise social software projects

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Abstract

The use of social software in organizations has matured over the last years. Enterprise social software such as a wiki, blog and social network creates value for employees, optimizes workflows and contributes to improved collaboration within and across enterprises. However, many organizations face problems and barriers during the introduction of social software tools and platforms, which can have a decisive impact on the overall success. Through a comprehensive analysis of 13 case studies and 6 problem-centered interviews with experts of social software introduction, a framework for problems occurring in enterprise social software projects was created. In total, 21 different problems that influence a social software introduction were identified and clustered into the areas of project management, technology, culture, top management, and employees.

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Keywords: enterprise social software; social enterprise; enterprise 2.0; case study analysis; problem-centered interview; qualitative data analysis

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1. Introduction

Social software is an established part of enterprise content management platforms in many organizations. It is used in the documentation and sharing of corporate knowledge, it has the potential to change the communication and the handling of knowledge within a company, it supports the daily work of the employees and it contributes to improved collaboration across enterprises¹. Tools such as wikis, blogs and social networks are versatile and easy to access; they offer immediate use to optimize workflows, increase the quality of content and create benefits for its users^{2,3}. As social software is based on the web 2.0 idea^{4,5} and thus on collaboration and co-creation, it is necessary to start raising awareness as early as possible during the introduction of enterprise social software in order to achieve acceptance of implemented tools in the long term⁶.

The introduction of software in organizations has a long history in IS research. Authors have also already dealt extensively with the project management of enterprise social software or, as it is also called, Enterprise 2.0 and have analyzed critical success factors (e.g. McAfee⁷, or Gust von Loh & Peters⁶). It has also been shown that Enterprise 2.0 needs to be user centered and needs to target at both technical and organizational success factors⁸. However, less attention has been paid to possible problems and barriers in the introduction of social software that can also have a decisive impact on the success potential. It is important to know technical, organizational and managerial pitfalls at the beginning of enterprise social software projects in order to take countermeasures and even prevent failures. But these are often retained and as a result many organizations go into a social software implementation without knowing in detail which problems can occur. Often, these problems are recognized only in retrospect and lead to a considerable increase in work and costs for countermeasures.

The objective of this paper is therefore to identify problems in the introduction of enterprise social software. Section 2 outlines the research design comprising document analysis of existing case study reports followed by problem-centered expert interviews. The problems identified in the areas of project management, technology, culture, top management, and employees are discussed in Section 3. The last section briefly concludes the paper.

2. Research design

The overall research followed a general inductive approach and consisted of two separate phases. First, a document analysis of existing case study reports was undertaken to get a first impression of possible problems and clusters for a framework for further analysis. In the second phase, problem-centered expert interviews were executed. Having gathered the data for both phases the research applied the following steps for the qualitative data analysis⁹: (i) close reading of the texts (i.e. cases and interviews) and identification of specific text segments related to the objective, (ii) identification of categories (i.e. lower-level problems), and (iii) revision/refinement of the categories and creation of a framework (i.e. consolidation of lower-level problems and identification of upper-level problem areas).

2.1. Phase 1: Case study research

As stated, the research started with an analysis of case studies. The Enterprise 2.0 cases website (www.e20cases.org), which features quality-assured case studies on the use of enterprise social software in German language, was used as source. As the success of such projects are subjective to a certain degree and not clearly measurable^{7,10}, we assumed that at least some barriers, obstacles, challenges or problems during the runtime of the project were reported. The cases follow a similar template with sections like lessons learned and the like that should provide evidence for problems. The main purpose of this research phase therefore was to get a reasonable overview of common problems or barriers and see if there are noticeable recurring topics or themes that can be clustered into a framework.

Case study analysis as method was chosen as it allows to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context¹¹. Case studies are often criticized to have a low degree of objectivity or representative meaning when compared with other social research methods such as experiments or quantitative surveys. It should be noted, however, that a case study analysis, in contrast to a quantitative method, offers the possibility of understanding the meaning of

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