

Collaboration Using Social Media: The Case of Podio in a Voluntary Organization

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Abstract. Social media enables a new model of managing knowledge that involves formal and informal communication, collaboration using a variety of applications. Using a case study approach, this article investigates the affordances of such Social Media enhanced Platforms (SMeP) for the management of knowledge work (communication and collaboration). In particular it aims to address the following research questions: What are the affordances of SMeP for the management of knowledge work in a voluntary organization? How do individuals experience the opportunities and challenges of these collaborative platforms?

This paper presents the results of an empirical study on the adoption and use of social media in a voluntary organization. The findings pinpoint towards the potential use of SMeP for shaping new work practices but also towards the issues encountered when social media is introduced in organizations.

Keywords: social media, collaboration, e-collaboration, knowledge sharing, social software, web 2.0.

1 Introduction

Social media enables a new model of managing knowledge that involves formal and informal communication, collaboration using a variety of applications. This model allows managing knowledge at both personal and organizational level, facilitating knowledge sharing and virtual interaction through easy to use collaborative tools [1]. In a knowledge-intensive organization the dynamics offered by Web 2.0 solutions is one way of utilizing the potential that collective intelligence offers and one way of addressing the challenges of the knowledge society and its ability to harness and retain relevant knowledge and stimulate collective creativity. Recent literature emphasizes that collectives are more inventive than isolated individuals because their members bring diverse knowledge related to the shared task and inventions emerge out of their interactions, assuming that synergy between the members of the collective is realized [2]. Social media-enhanced platforms are designed not merely to distribute knowledge but also provide conditions in which knowledge is shared and new knowledge is created or exchanged through collaborative processes using social networks, wikis or blogs.

The literature suggests that teamwork and collaboration are central for knowledge creation and innovation. Innovation and knowledge creation are two strong interrelated concepts [3, 4]. The design of new innovative ideas which can be further transformed into new products and services or used for problem solving and decision making draws upon collective creative performance. Furthermore knowledge is created through a collaborative effort, relies on team work, and therefore fostering creativity and collaborative innovation are central endeavors for organizations.

Organizations and researchers have started to experiment with the use of social media in an organizational context, hoping to reap the benefits of lightweight informal collaboration among employees [5, 6]. These studies focused on social media participation and how to better engage users using social media within big IT consultancies.

When investigating how motivated are people to use social software, the acceptance of users is a crucial indicator [7]. According to [8] the correct deployment of social technologies in a corporate context will result in better communication and collaboration, more effective knowledge management and faster innovation. The Danish designed Podio collaborative platform founders argue that such platforms will represent “the future of work”. This study will take a critical look at the adoption and use of Social Media (SM) in knowledge-intensive organization through a case study method and literature review. In particular, this article explores the affordances of such Social Media enhanced Platforms (SMeP) for managing knowledge processes and collaborative practices. The article focuses on the user experience and aims to understand how and why individuals use Podio and what their collaborative and work practices are. In particular the article aims to address the following questions: What are the affordances of SMeP for the management of knowledge work in a voluntary organization? How do individuals experience the opportunities and challenges of these collaborative platforms?

The article aims to shed light and discuss the opportunities and challenges organizations (the managers’ perspective) and employees face in the adoption and use of such tools.

2 Literature Review

Groupware technologies are information and communication tools used traditionally in organizations to support collaborative work processes have started to be increasingly replaced by social media-enhanced platforms. Social media systems apply a network based relationship and resembles to the functionality and design of Facebook while classic applications apply a folder or a group based approach [9]. SMeP apply the same basic concepts as other collaborative systems but with a different adoption creating a different user experience [9].

Some previous studies have already emphasized that social media can help knowledge conversion and team performance [10] or can improve collaboration and communication within most companies [11]. The pooling of knowledge from individuals but also properties of the network of interactions and properties of individual agents (e.g. cognitive capacity) influence the rate of invention [2].

Despite the big success of social media, there are not so many studies on the topic of social media collaboration in SMEs and voluntary organizations. Many studies have been reported by big multinational corporations and in particular big IT consultancies which are at the forefront of adopting social media focusing on specific tools [12-15]. Lots of studies are available on the topic of social media collaboration in an educational context [16, 17]. Researchers have also started to investigate the integrated perspectives between Web 2.0/social media and CSCW [18-20]. CSCW was related to goal and work orientation emphasizing on communication and coordination while social media (Web 2.0) provide a rich user experience and playfulness in their application [18]. “The field of CSCW has an intense interest in studying collaborative practices” [21].

3 Methods and Setting

This article discusses an in-depth case study of a voluntary organization. Case studies are applicable for studying unexplored emerging fields and thus viable sources of evidence for the development of theoretical implications [22]. The study combines mixed method data analysis, including qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and quantitative data from a questionnaire, with literature review. Data was collected by means of semi-structured face-to-face interviews, questionnaires and participant observation. In total 6 interviews were conducted, 5 with students, aged between 21 and 26, from all the levels of organizations (2 team leaders, 3 executive board members) and 1 interview with an IT consultant and entrepreneur working with Podio. Furthermore 25 questionnaires have been answered. Interviews have been recorded and transcribed verbatim. The focus of interviews was on the interviewees’ perception of Podio as a SMEP. The semi-structured interviews included some of the following questions: How does Podio change the way we work?, How does Podio differ from other platforms?, How was Podio introduced in organisation?, What are the main benefits?, Does Podio increase collaboration and innovation within organisation? Does Podio increase efficiency? What are the challenges?

The short questionnaire included both opened and closed questions such as: Are you satisfied with the use of Podio within AIESEC? What do you think are the main benefits of using Podio within AIESEC? What are the main challenges in using Podio? What kind of applications and features of Podio do you use the most? What features would you like to have in Podio? How often do you check Podio? What are the processes that can be supported by Podio? Furthermore the questionnaire included some additional open questions in order to assess the perception of its users in relation with other mainstream social media tools: Would you prefer to use other platforms, such as e-mail, Google doc or Facebook, instead of Podio? How does Podio differ from other platforms such as e-mail, Google doc or Facebook?

In analyzing the data, the author has tried to identify the perception of individual users and managers of such platforms in terms of both opportunities and challenges.

4 Podio Adoption and Use in AIESEC

4.1 Podio Design as a Working Platform

Podio is an online work platform, which today many companies, organizations and people use to conduct their daily operations. Podio was founded in early 2009 in Denmark by Jon Froda, Anders Pollas and Andreas Haugstrup Pedersen. Later Kasper Hulthén joined the team. Jon Froda describes Podio's vision as "the future of work": "What really sets Podio apart is how it puts people in control of their work tools, rather than the other way around." [23]

Podio is designed to be a 'complete work platform for enterprise' and aims to integrate many different work tasks through one application. Furthermore Podio allows knowledge workers to build easily their own tailored applications. Furthermore, companies can easily customize Podio according to specific business processes and needs. Using the app builder it is easy to create workspaces and add the relevant workers to the space. By providing such a social media-enhanced work platform Podio is designed to support knowledge creation, collaboration, to remove bottlenecks and to increase the overall efficiency. Podio began getting its first customers in August 2009. As Podio gained momentum, the founders worked with others who shared the Podio's vision for the future of work and was acquired by Citrix Systems in 2012. Presently about 200000 organizations worldwide are utilizing Podio [24], and today Podio speaks seven different languages. By March 2012 users built over one million applications [25].

4.2 Characteristics of Podio

Despite strong links to the design of other online social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), the design of Podio is quite unique. The platform provides organizations with professional social media-enhanced collaborative workspaces. The visual design of Podio is similar to Facebook, the most popular social networking site. Users of Podio can also post status updates, comment and 'like' these updates. Podio is a platform that encourages social interaction and transparency in day to day work processes. Podio offers its companies hundreds of applications, which can be utilized for standardized business activities such as project management, recruitment and business development. It also offers additional features such as calendars, task commander, private messages, and chat functionality hence combining communication and work activity on the same platform. Furthermore users can easily customize the workspaces and build their own apps.

4.3 Organisational Background

AIESEC is a global youth organization that provides young people with a leadership platform, and offers students and recent graduates the opportunity to go on international internships. AIESEC is the world's largest student organization, present in over 110 different countries and has over 86,000 members worldwide.

AIESEC in Copenhagen Business School (CBS) has been present at CBS since 1948. Today AIESEC CBS has over 60 members within its local committee who work in the six department areas of the organization; Finance, Communications and Marketing, Human Resources, Incoming Exchange, Outgoing Exchange and Engagement with AIESEC and Alumni Relations.

Despite these distinct departments AIESEC CBS as an organization works cross-functionally to provide students at CBS with the opportunity to volunteer or work overseas, and develop partnerships with local companies. They also provide an internal leadership program for interested members, and organize external workshops and events for CBS students. Due to many levels of management and the high level of activity there is a special emphasis on internal communication, collaboration and information management within AIESEC CBS.

4.4 Podio Adoption at AIESEC

Podio was first introduced into AIESEC at CBS in May 2011, and is an official local sponsor of the organization. The partnership was initialized and in return for unlimited, free access to Podio as a non-profit organization, AIESEC CBS was to provide feedback to Podio.

In the beginning introducing Podio into AIESEC CBS was challenging for the management team. Prior to this AIESEC CBS's primary tool for internal communication was e-mail and Facebook. Projects and processes were done with a variety of tools such as: Dropbox, Google docs, word documents and excel. Within the first year of Podio at AIESEC, people were still communicating via other platforms and members were not checking Podio regularly enough.

One of the main factors affecting the implementation of Podio in the first year was the initial lack of strategy within AIESEC CBS. The former local committee president between 2011/2012 recognized that a major source of failure was a lack of strategy in how the platform should be used. Being new to the platform themselves, the management team was still testing out the various functionalities of Podio:

"We did not have any idea how we wanted to work with it when we got all the new members, so it was a bit confusing in the beginning."

The plan was to have Podio fully integrated within the organization before the new members were joining in September 2011, however this aim was not realized. The president at the time argued that the management did not know what functionalities of Podio they wanted to use and how to formulate an internal communication policy. Furthermore there was no organizational-wide training or introductions to Podio.

In September 2012 the newly elected 2012/2013 management team decided that Podio would be AIESEC CBS's only source of communication and implemented this policy before new members joined the organization. Furthermore new members of AIESEC were given an introduction of the platform, and urged not to use any other device to contact the other members.

Podio was adopted in AIESEC CBS for a variety of reasons. People liked the separation of 'work' and 'social.' People did not like the idea of getting several messages a day about AIESEC work on a social platform like Facebook. According to the

survey relating to the satisfaction of Podio within AIESEC CBS, a majority of participants mentioned they liked having a platform devoted entirely to AIESEC.

Management also saw problems with utilizing e-mail for internal communication. First of all, people did not like getting their personal e-mail “spammed” with AIESEC related news. Although, every new member of AIESEC received an AIESEC specific e-mail account, people still did not like getting spammed with internal AIESEC communication. This was seen as a problem because many members were in contact with external members of the organizations, and important e-mails were overlooked or sometimes lost. Essentially the separation of external communication and internal communication was also an important point in the adoption of Podio.

Furthermore e-mail was also perceived as an inefficient method of communication in terms of collaboration and feedback. Often the input and opinions of people were lost in the threads of the e-mail. This was due to the fact that often more than one issue was discussed per e-mail and the layout of e-mail was designed in a way where priority is given to the last person who responded. Podio was seen as a solution for this problem. Essentially each ‘post’ can be dedicated to a different issue and the comment and ‘like’ functions also encourage users to give feedback. Furthermore, unlike e-mail this feedback is more visible and clear. This is due to the fact the feedback is targeting an issue specific to the post, and the fact users receive a notification when other users comment on their posts. On top of this, the ‘workspace’ function allows members to distinguish different teams and projects they are a part of and gives users a natural organizational structure to store their information. The local committee space has also been recognized as a platform for creating a unified working culture. The local committee space is a Podio space that has access to applications and which all AIESEC CBS members are a part of. It is a space where everyone in the organization can interact and collaborate.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

Organizations are trying to embrace social media however despite the potential advantages associated with the adoption and use, organizations and employees are challenged to adapt to new ways of working inherently distributed and collaborative. Using a case study approach, this article has identified new patterns of use, new possibilities for shaping new work practices and has pinpointed towards challenges of adopting SMeP for CSCW.

Podio aims to be a ‘complete work platform for enterprise’, integrating social media and software as service paradigm. Podio is designed so all work tasks can be organized through customizable apps organized in workspaces. Furthermore Podio allows workers to build their own apps and empowers users to customize their own work processes. Unlike any other mainstream platforms that members of organizations typically use in their private life, Podio offers a plethora of applications and features relevant for organizational use.

One example of Podio use in project management, in AIESEC CBS, was their autumn member recruitment campaign. Essentially all functions of the recruitment

strategy were linked to Podio. Discussions of the recruitment marketing campaign were held on Podio, applications were linked to the platform. Furthermore evaluations of the applicants were discussed on Podio and interview feedback was stored on this platform. One particular distinctive advantageous feature of Podio is the fact users can design their own applications. This has led to Podio supporting new work processes. For example, this term the human resource team is now using Podio to track member satisfaction by creating a specially designed application to evaluate members' satisfaction.

In AIESEC CBS Podio applications are used for: communication (room bookings, organizing events), sharing documents, personal calendars, and for project management (assigning tasks, tracking tasks progress). According to the survey conducted at AIESEC CBS, Podio has been primarily used for internal communication (95.8% of respondents), followed by knowledge sharing 83.3%, and collaboration 70.8%. Despite the highly customizable and innovative features in these AIESEC projects, the survey showed that only 8.3% of the respondents recognized the innovation as an associated process facilitated by Podio.

However one of the biggest challenges in ensuring Podio as an effective internal communication tool is making sure all members are active users of Podio. Essentially, Podio loses its value as an internal communication tool, unless all members are active users. Changing the habits of people has been recognized as the most challenging aspect of implementing Podio by both the present and past management team of AIESEC CBS. Getting people to check Podio regularly and use the platform as the only source of internal communication has been a problem identified particularly by the Vice-President of Communication in 2012.

Respondents of the survey have voiced that they are already connected with many other social networking sites/tools and that adapting Podio to their daily routine is a challenge. New members also have problems adapting to the interface of Podio. Certain members have perceived that the platform is not explicitly user friendly and can be confusing at times. This has been linked with management of the Podio system; the existence of superfluous workspaces spaces and complicated applications.

According to the questionnaire, 56% of respondents surveyed are satisfied, 20% are very satisfied, 12% are undecided and only 12% are not so satisfied with the use of Podio in their local committee (0% are unsatisfied with the use of Podio). However, there are still suggestions for the improvement of Podio. In terms of functionality the young professionals use of the platform for coordinating meetings (76% respondents), communication and collaborating in customized workspaces (72%), calendars functionality (40%) and tasks (20%). When surveyed about possible improvements to the platform, respondents mentioned that they would like personal profiles, reminders, chat functions and a graphically illustrated overview of their activity.

Following the first year experience, new members follow an introductory training session about using Podio. These trainings go through the basic functionalities of Podio such as spaces, messages, calendars and how to use some of the applications. Further coaching is then given to specific members who need to learn more about applications. After the basic training, AIESEC CBS promotes Podio as an intuitive, 'learning by doing' platform.

Another major challenge regarding Podio is aligning this local information management platform to the global AIESEC platform. Myaiesec.net is the global information management system and the platform for AIESEC's international exchange program. New members of AIESEC CBS are not only introduced to Podio but the global platform myaiesec.net. Whilst myaiesec.net serves rather as huge database of information, rather than a direct communication platform, it is nevertheless difficult to ensure members are uploading documents on both Podio and myaiesec.net. The issue of distributing information twice to both the local and global information systems reduces some of the efficiency gains of Podio. Furthermore, the promotion of an internal local information management system essentially isolates AIESEC CBS's entity from the rest of the AIESEC global community. This is an issue due to the fact the entity will be excluding itself from knowledge sharing on a global scale despite the fact knowledge sharing and collaboration may be high within a local setting. Hence, clear promotion of both platforms is necessary for AIESEC CBS in order not to become isolated in a global setting.

The author of this article anticipates the uptake of such platforms by different types of organizations, especially SMEs and voluntary organizations (not only tech-savvy organizations as presented in most of the studies available [4, 5]). The article analyses work related benefits of the use and new patterns of work facilitated by such platforms in a professional context. Platforms like Podio facilitate new possibilities for managing work and collaboration that are different from traditional working and collaborating practices (e.g. using email, traditional groupware technologies or Intranets). Furthermore the article has highlighted challenges that managers and young professionals experience in the adoption of such platforms (including lack of strategy, adapting to a new social media platform, "sense making" of its new possibilities).

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