



# Management perception of introducing social networking sites as a knowledge management tool in higher education

## A case study

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to present a study of the understanding and usage of social networking sites (SNS) as a knowledge management (KM) tool in knowledge-intensive enterprises.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In terms of research approach, the study has taken an interpretivist framework, using a higher education (HE) institution as the case-study, which is characterised by the need to generate process, share and use knowledge on a daily basis in order to remain competitive. The case study was analysed using qualitative research methodology, composed of interviews and utilised narrative analysis as a means of data analysis, thus deriving a characterisation of understandings, perceptions and acceptance of SNS as a KM tool.

**Findings** – The study provides evidence that even in HE, where it is generally acknowledged that there is a need to adequately capture, store, share and disseminate knowledge, as this can lead to greater innovation, creativity and productivity, participants were suspicious of the nature of the technology and the fact that it could intertwine their professional and social life. As a result, they were not prepared to invest the relatively high effort required in employing SNS as a KM tool as they also have difficulty in establishing the added value. Consequently, in order to employ SNS for KM purposes cultural, behavioural and organisational issues need to be tackled before even considering technical issues.

**Originality/value** – The paper provides an insight into KM and social networking in HE. This also highlights issue for international HE.

**Keywords** Social networks, Knowledge management, Higher education

**Paper type** Research paper

### 1. Introduction

The concept of knowledge management (KM) represents an increasingly important area of consideration particularly for public sector organisations such as higher education (HE) institutions which, as a service provider, relies on the intellectual capital and the knowledge of its staff.

Capturing, organising and sharing organisational knowledge is imperative in order to maximise and fully exploit this intellectual asset. With the current external pressures of economic instability, changes in governmental policy and increased globalisation and commercialisation, the UK education sector at this time not only needs to be efficient and effective but also innovative and trend setting in order to remain competitive.



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It is against this milieu, that the use of social networking sites (SNS) is considered as a possible alternative to share organisational knowledge. A case study of an UK educational institution which promotes and encourages the use of information learning technologies (ILT) as both an organisational driver and a teaching and learning tool was employed as the subject of scrutiny. This institution was selected as it has identified the need to strengthen and develop its KM practices.

## 2. Knowledge use

Even though knowledge is disseminated and shared its utilisation in an organisation is not always easily achieved, owing to a number of barriers. CIHR (2000) highlighted the barriers to knowledge use: knowledge, attitudes/motivation, behaviour and external barriers. Each of these factors can be concluded as resulting from individual characteristics or organisational characteristics such as culture, positioning, technology, leadership and motivation. From an organisational perspective influences can be further defined as a managerial, resource or environmental positioning that can affect the manner in which knowledge can and utilised within an organisation (Holsapple and Joshi, 2000). When successfully implemented, improved knowledge use can be extremely beneficial and result in the acceleration of knowledge dissemination within a relatively wide context. As knowledge is used and adapted in the organisation, new knowledge is created and applied in a cumulative and iterative manner. Furthermore, Senge (2006) believes the organisation that will prosper in the future will be those that make best use of the knowledge they hold and are able to exploit this through organisational learning.

### 2.1 Knowledge management tools

KM tools have been available for a considerable time, generally as products of software vendors aiming to create a “one stop shop” solution for an organisation’s KM needs. IT tools such as document repositories, document management systems, intranet pages and the creation of online learning materials, have been used primarily in the organisation for the purpose of capturing messy and unstructured information thereby making it searchable and easily accessible to employees (Gurteen, 2008). But this traditional understanding of the tools required to manage knowledge holds a fairly narrow view of KM as it focuses only on explicit knowledge, this is increasingly being challenged as too narrow as it does not allow for an acceptance that knowledge is embedded within individuals (McLure Wasko and Faraj, 2000). Therefore, these KM tools become repositories of explicit knowledge, without being filtered into the organisational cog for re-engineering, creativity and innovation.

It is within this context, that the researchers consider the potential usefulness of SNS as an organisational KM tool. This research examines and discusses SNS in terms of their ability to share knowledge, link like-minded people and strengthen ties between colleagues within an organisation.

## 3. Social networking sites

The speed with which SNS and other Web 2.0 technologies have been adopted has been immense. In fact, according to Neilson Online (2009), the time spent on social network and blogging sites accounted for 17 per cent of all time spent on the internet in August 2009 which has since tripled. The growth in user acceptance and business use of SNS

suggests a change in the way these technologies are perceived and valued by both businesses and users, which makes them an interesting proposition for business use and more specifically KM (Perez, 2009).

In terms of KM, the usefulness of a SNS lies in the fact that it “would let us see who knows what, who does what and even who controls what and update us continuously in all of these fronts” (Donston, 2008). Therefore, a corporate SNS, rather than being a repository of formal explicit knowledge could capture tacit knowledge in terms of moods, hunches, insights, experiences, relationships and cultural swings, thus providing a snapshot of the organisation at a particular interval. Hence, knowledge sharing would occur both vertically and horizontally in the organisation and, therefore, provide the desired impact of creating new knowledge and innovation. McDermott and Archibald (2010) claim that social networks of experts have for some time existed outside of the use of the internet or SNS and are increasingly being integrated and incorporated into organisational structures. Whilst it is possible to see how SNS could be used to provide a KM solution, by allowing individuals within the organisation to see the skills and attributes of others, it is questionable whether those already using SNS would be willing to exploit the system for business use and those currently not utilising SNS would be willing to try.

### *3.1 Motivation for using SNS as a KM tool*

The phenomenal rise of people connecting, creating and distributing information via SNS has led to organisations, corporations and even government institutions not only vying for a presence but also promoting themselves via these environments. Increasingly, these organisations are transacting and communicating with employees, customers, stakeholders, business partners and third-party companies via social networks such as: LinkedIn.com, Bebo.com, Facebook, Myspace.com and Ning.com, Orkut.com amongst others.

Whilst some organisations have embraced this phenomenon others have been hesitant to exploit their potential for social and business use. Not only are SNS useful for influencing the adoption and use of products and services but they are a valuable resource for team building, disseminating, sharing and maintaining knowledge in organisations (Subramani and Rajagopalan, 2003) In general, social networks represent “who knows who”, but for KM purposes social networks represent “who knows what” (Jones, 2001). The potential for knowledge sharing in these environments is limited only to the knowledge sharer and the amount of information that they are willing to provide to recipient which, in itself, may be promoted by the nature of SNS as a motivator through community interest and moral obligation (McLure Wasko and Faraj, 2000).

Research conducted by (Office of Communications (OFCOM), 2008), into gaining an understanding of the general attitudes and behaviours towards social networking, shows there are five main motivations for using SNS. These are: alpha socialisers, attention seekers, followers, faithfuls and functionals. This research indicates that there are a number of reasons for users to sign up or become affiliated with a SNS. Although this research does not differentiate between social users or business users, it forms the basis upon which to consider whether motivators and barriers to use may relate to the reasons specific groups of users identified in the OFCOM study.

Motivation for use as a driver or possible barrier within a business context is supported by Ardichvili *et al.* (2003). They claim that one of the critical factors in determining the success of a virtual community is the motivation its members have to actively participate in knowledge generation and sharing activities. Suarez (2007) went on further to state that:

[...] what makes a social network function isn't so much the tools as it is the attitude you've got to have to "want to" and that isn't something you can get out of a box.

Studies such as the Beehive Project at IBM have shown that generally SNS usage for business purposes is largely centred around the ability to access information as opposed to social usage. Social usage focuses largely on the ability of the user to strengthen existing ties as opposed to creating new links. Users in this case generally seek profiles for those that they already know rather than viewing new profiles (DiMicco *et al.*, 2008). Within organisations, however, the ability to strengthen weaker ties may be an advantage as it is likely that employees within a smaller organisation have existing relationships with the majority of other employees.

Whilst motivation for the use of SNS within a personal context are to share and link with individuals there are also two additional motivations for usage that have been identified as specifically relating to business use: career progression and rallying support for ideas. DiMicco *et al.* (2008) have defined these motivations as caring, climbing and campaigning and each will represent a potential motivation for business use amongst employees.

### 3.2 *Barriers to the use of SNS*

There are a number of potential barriers to SNS. These not only pose as a barrier for personal users but also for potential corporate social networking users.

**3.2.1 *Technology.*** It is clear that without the rise of internet and Web 2.0 technologies, SNS would not be available today. The huge success of SNS has often been accredited not only to their novelty but also their nature. The fact that these communities have constant sources of updated feeds, blogs and profiles has been identified as the key reasons for their success (Donath, 2007). Clearly the ability to make these sites "sticky" and attractive to users as well as the manner in which they are continually updated has propelled their popularity and provided drivers to their use. Nonetheless, the technology itself can also be seen as a barrier to use for individuals who are unfamiliar or who lack the interest or skills required to use new technologies (Allcock *et al.*, 1999; Keaney, 2009).

**3.2.2 *Perceived value of use.*** The increase in internet usage for some businesses has resulted in a loss of productivity amongst staff, as employees are increasingly using the internet for personal use during work time (BBC, 2007). Reports such as these and alleged abuse may lead to a consideration amongst managers that SNS are a waste of time and of little business value to the organisation. This may result in a lack of support for its use and adoption as a KM tool and, therefore, a barrier to its use. This may be overtly stated or implicitly inferred within organisations and may form part of contracts or disciplinary processes.

**3.2.3 *Privacy and trust.*** Privacy issues around SNS appear to be of concern for both existing and non-members. This occurs in both groups where it is perceived that the organisation is overtly monitoring internet usage, particularly, if previous

issues of internet usage have arisen within the organisation and disciplinary actions taken.

For existing users, however, there were concerns relating to privacy, when the site is not used solely for personal use. There is also a loss of a sense of autonomy, in which members are able to manage their own profile but cannot control the information which appears on their friend's profile. This poses potential embarrassment for the individual or even an organisation (Dwyer *et al.*, 2007).

*3.2.4 Lack of ownership.* The issue of lack of ownership is perhaps most important when it is considered that the nature of SNS leads to both the persistence and accumulation of any information that is posted onto a profile (Barnes, 2007). This has been discussed by a number of authors including Cain (2007) who further highlighted that these concerns not only relate to the nature of online information as being persistent but also searchable, replicable and available to invisible audiences. Dwyer *et al.* (2007) further develops this argument by considering that "a digital message can remain as part of a system for an undefined and undisclosed period of time." Therefore, this information once sent into cyberspace can become part of the invisible or even visible web, where the author no longer has control of its distribution.

*3.2.5 Relationships.* Relationships are important drivers for KM within a SNS context. This is because the majority of people with whom an individual forms links, within an organisation would be known them in that existing capacity. It must also be noted that a key strength to SNS lies in the ability to strengthen weak ties where individuals may be acquaintances, but not friends.

This is demonstrated by Donath (2007) who considers that "a sparsely connected network of weak but heterogeneous ties provides access to a great variety of ideas and experiences." In this respect, it would appear that a large network would be advantageous, but it should be highlighted that any communication tool, including SNS, are only as powerful as the number of people that use them (Cornelius, 2008).

#### 4. Methodology

An interpretivist approach was adopted for this research project as it focuses on the understanding of the world as it is; as well as a development of an understanding of the social world from the level of subjective experience within the realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity (Burrell and Morgan, 1989). The interpretive paradigm also seeks to understand the perceptions and perspectives of people within the organisation, as a number of subgroups would have developed with shared meanings or perceptions that are subjective (Nunes *et al.*, 2005).

There are a number of fundamental motivations for adopting an interpretive approach for this study. These primarily were:

- It addresses qualitative issues aimed at producing an understanding of the social contexts and the social processes of the case study organisation.
- It supports the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of complex social phenomena in human activity systems, namely to understand the sociological aspects in KM process.
- It supports the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of complex social phenomena.

- It tries to understand all the nuances of the phenomena under scrutiny, thereby providing clarification and insight into the situation.

The adoption of an interpretivist approach is selected on the basis that the validity of an extrapolation depends on the plausibility and clarity of the logical reasoning used in describing the results and drawing conclusions from the cases (Walsham, 1993).

#### 4.1 Case study approach

Owing to the exploratory nature of this research and the interest in identifying the main stakeholders, strategies, barriers and influences that affect using SNS as a KM tool, the researchers selected case study approach. The case studies as a research tool has become increasingly important in recent times. This according to Soy (1998) is because case study research is excellent at simplifying complex issues or objects and can draw on experience and, or, add to the strength of information from other researchers. According to Yin (1994, p. 1) “case studies are preferred when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context”. This study adopted an exploratory strategy since they can be used to discover theory by directly observing a social phenomenon in a “raw” form. Exploratory case studies are generally used in situations where the phenomenon being evaluated has no clear or single outcome. In addition, the researchers have enhanced the accuracy of the empirical results in this case study through their experience in HE and one of them have experience in the chosen institution since 2001 as a member of staff.

#### 4.2 Interviews

The methods often used in a case study include interviews, observation, group discussions, narratives and analysis of documentary evidence (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Interviews were conducted designed to elicit the underlying assumptions and management attitudes towards the use of SNS as a KM tool. Interviews were semi-structured which lead to exploration of the emerging themes and more in-depth discussion.

Interviews were used as the data collection method and this consisted of eight sets of interviews. Interviews were conducted with senior management (SMT), directors (DIR), heads of department (HD) and academic heads (AH). Interviews were selected as the method of data collection as one of the main focuses of the research was to determine individual’s perceptions and perspectives. These individuals were selected as they occupied decision making roles in the institution and the implementation of such environments was dependent on their commitment and support. Therefore, should these managers buy into the concept of using a SNS as a KM tool, this acceptance and commitment would influence user acceptance rates and ultimately its success.

### 5. Data analysis

The data analysis for qualitative interviews can be extremely complex and nuanced. As a result, interviews were conducted and analysed using narrative analysis, which examines the different ways people make and use stories to interpret the social world (Lawler, 2002). Narrative analysis is:

[...] an account of an experience that is told in a sequenced way, indicating a flow of related events that, taken together, are significant for the narrator and which convey meaning to the researcher (Saunders *et al.*, 2007, p. 504).

Since narratives are socially circulated and public, according to Somers and Gibson (1994) in Lawler (2002, p. 251), they are “attached to cultural and institutional formations rather than the single individual”.

Narrative accounts were analysed in their entirety rather than being broken into codes and categories as this allowed the researchers to better understand the social and organisational context in which the interviewees operated. Bryman and Bell (2007) show how narrative analysis can be used in management research and can be helpful to understand organisational culture.

Participants’ accounts were viewed as stories based on personal experience and opinion. The interview accounts were searched for connections between events and concentrated on the interviewee’s perspective rather than on the events themselves.

## 6. Case of a UK University

The case study is based on an educational institution providing a range of further education and HE provision within the UK. The institution provides education on both a full and part time basis and has current enrolments of approximately 2,000 students.

The organisation has a fairly long history and has been in existence for more than 150 years. Throughout this time, the institution has been based within a central urban location with the majority of provision being based within one campus.

Much like all educational institutions the organisation has faced, and continues to face, a number of challenges and changes. Incorporation with the early 1990s, when the institution gained its autonomy from the local authority, and the trend towards greater commercialisation of education in recent years the organisation is essentially considered to be in a constant state of evolution and change owing to a number of internal and external factors.

As a service provider, the institution is highly dependent upon the skills and expertise of its staff in terms the general management of the institution, and the direct delivery of lectures, seminars and tutorials to students. With the current staffing base of approximately 200 staff, there is a fairly even distribution between academic and business support roles.

Being education provider, the institution places great emphasis on knowledge held within its boundaries as well as the skills and expertise of the staff. These form the basis of the intellectual capital for the institution as the primary source of competitive advantage and organisational strength. It is important to note that at present the institution does not have a KM strategy, or systematic plans for succession or workforce planning.

However, the institution has made significant investment in ILT over the last few years in terms of infrastructure, hardware and software. It can be considered to have embraced technology in both an organisational management context and for learning and teaching. It is, therefore, expected that technology will not represent a barrier to usage for any proposed KM system.

## 7. Results of findings

### 7.1 Knowledge management strategy

The interviews indicate that there was a lack of clarity within the institution concerning the existence of a KM strategy. Surprisingly, and even paradoxically, whilst senior managers claim the institution had no KM strategy, middle managers and those across the organisation hierarchy believed one existed. However, even though middle

managers believed the organisation had a KM strategy they were unclear about its definition and nature. This would seem to indicate that either managers lower down in the organisation believe that strategies or policies existed which they were unaware of or that they simply did not know and were unwillingly to admit this to the interviewers.

For the middle managers, the belief was KM strategy existed but may be labelled differently:

[...] I think it is dependent upon the department [...] what people hold in their heads [...] (HD1).

[...] I know about it under another name (HD2).

These responses are not unique to this institution as seen in Newman and Adesola (1998) where organisations and individuals, even though they carry out KM practices may not label it as such. What was, however, surprising was the lack of clarity and ambiguity of policies and strategies that exist within the institution. This lack, however, has been recognised by SMT1 who has realised the necessity of clear communication and KM strategy:

[...] most of it is there but it comes back to how its communicated, back to how its managed, how its disseminated and we have an assumption that people know or that we think we've told them or there is misinterpretation so it's about clarity also of communication (SMT1).

Whilst senior managers considered a KM strategy to be a future organisation imperative, this however, was not shared amongst other staff as they consider the concept of a KM strategy as constraining rather than supportive or even progressive:

[...] I feel as though they are constructing a kind of confinement of knowledge (AH1).

In addition, it was perceived that the implementation of a KM strategy would be considered to be a hierarchical top-down process, in other words a top management decision which would result in a lack of success:

Staff won't necessarily fully reveal or utilise all of their knowledge through that (AH1).

There were even some elements of resistance to change where the DIR1 claims:

[...] I would take issue eventually with this; I would take issue with that (DIR1).

Therefore, staff would not accept the idea of implementing a KM strategy, because it was a top management initiative. In this respect, a KM strategy would be unlikely to be successful in the organisation unless it can be "sold" to staff as being beneficial and they were actively involved in the decision-making process. This indicate as well that lower staff need to be involved from the beginning in formulating the KM strategy as this will later on reduce their resistance to the adoption of this new technology.

Despite, the absence of a clear KM strategy the ensuing section of this paper considers the perceptions and perspectives of individuals as to the acceptance and use of SNS as a KM tool.

### *7.2 Use and acceptance of SNS for KM purposes*

The success of any information system (IS) is measured by user acceptance and their willingness to utilise them. From the interviews it became apparent that the use of SNS, for any purpose, would generally be resisted by the organisation:



[...] I don't think that's the place, in the work place, to use Facebook or Bebo or whatever they're called [...] (HD3).

In general, the feeling from interviewees was that they would consider staff to be socialising or fraternising if they were seen using any SNS during working hours. Whilst it was believed that there was widespread use of SNS amongst the student population, use by staff was viewed as inappropriate during working time and quite often limited in its application for social purposes. Nonetheless, there were a few exceptions to this as some managers considered the use of SNS as an exciting opportunity to identify and disseminate organisational knowledge. Hence, it was perceived that the use of SNS could be beneficial to the institution. However, even though there were perceived benefits to the institution, middle managers believe this was more applicable to the student population rather than staff. In reality the majority of managers whilst not directly and vehemently discouraging use of SNS, believed the very nature of the technology made it inappropriate for use within the work place:

I don't know whether I would feel if a member of my staff was on SNS when they were in work [...]. I find it all a little bit invasive (HD3).

In fact, this was seen as so offensive that when an employee was considered using a SNS excessively, the person was dismissed:

[...] I've actually dismissed somebody for using SNS excessively because that's my time and we're paying for them to work (HD3).

The fact that SNS were so labelled posed a problem for a number of respondents who considered that the terminology makes the use of SNS inappropriate for business use and, therefore, SNS should only be used within a social context:

[...] if it was sort of branded and presented as another communication business tool [...]. I would probably be more keen than if it was just a SNS tool. I think it's just the term social networking that I have issue with (HD2).

Notable, however, is that amongst the group interviewed only three were currently active members and frequent users of a SNS. Hence, one possible explanation for the resistance to the use of a SNS as a KM tool was the fact that the majority were disengaged with the technology. There was also an obvious lack of understanding of how SNS can be utilised and are currently employed by a number of organisations and institutions for various business uses and professional functions. As a result, these interviewees had limited user knowledge of the processes and perceived benefits to the institution as seen in studies by Allcock *et al.* (1999) and Keaney (2009). Another explanation for the resistance to use SNS is the ambiguity of the perceived usefulness from the perspective of both senior managers and staff. This could be sorted by adopting a clear common strategy to adopt SNS as a tool to build community knowledge within businesses with clear guidelines for using SNS within business.

Amongst the interviews, there appeared to be a range of views concerning whether SNS would be accepted by staff as a KM tool. In fact, some felt it would be resisted as staff would be suspicious and cautious of the motives of the organisation for implementing such a tool, as individual's thoughts and moods can be capture and used against them. This, therefore, indicated a concern that the technology would be used for the purpose of monitoring rather than for knowledge dissemination and sharing:

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I think you know there would be a few suspicions around it [...] the kind of big brother that ultimately [...] would be feared (AH2).

Paradoxically, senior managers believe that there would be little resistance to acceptance amongst staff, as they consider the culture in the institution to be very open and trusting where everyone will be willing to share providing they have the time and are self motivated:

I don't think I see them resisting it at all, in fact, getting them to use it is another thing but resisting it no [...] Implicitly you may say if they don't use it their resisting it [...] but I don't think there would be an institutional resistance (SMT1).

Others, however, believe this could be tempered by the age, perception and experience of users a viewed seen in the literature and highlighted by Boyd and Ellison (2007):

I think the age and culture of certain people who are not that technologically minded would find it difficult to use systems like this and would probably resist (HD1).

There was, however, also more fundamental objections to the use of SNS which managers feel will prevent the acceptance of such systems. Again, this links to the fact that those who are technologically adverse would have another new system foisted upon them and could find it overwhelming, as some individuals are late adopters and are now just understanding and embracing existing systems. One middle manager for example, states:

[...] some managers don't even answer their emails so to introduce a SNS site imminently maybe a little bit too quick [...], if we're changing the culture this would be a really good step in the right direction [...] if its managed and promoted and marketed correctly to people maybe that fear will be taken away (HD3).

Therefore, from the discussion it can be seen that for the acceptance and use of SNS as a KM tool clear communication between management and users is imperative, in order for the system to gain acceptance and not to be seen as just another management fad.

### *7.3 Benefit of use of SNS as a KM tool*

Whilst the consideration of the value of discourse, discussion and communication was made by the majority of respondents all interviewees considered that the organisational knowledge was held in silos. This in some ways contradicts the concept of an open culture held by SMT:

[...] open door. Anybody can come with an idea (SMT1).

In reality, it became apparent that even though respondents considered the culture to be fairly open it was constrained by a number of cross directorate boundaries, which impedes the flow and use of knowledge in the institution:

I think it's fairly open but I think it's open within directorates [...]. If you look at the structure [...] you find that you're ok within your own directorate but [if] you try to cross a boundary into somebody else's and you do get walls go up. You do get these barriers (SMT2).

Therefore, in terms of knowledge use this provides a further indication that there is a lack of support for organisational wide knowledge sharing and perhaps a lack of use of existing knowledge within the organisation. As a result there was duplication of effort and time:

[...] if I didn't know they had it then there is probably no way that I would probably be able to find out so I would probably end up doing all the work on my own and then find out six months down the line oh you actually knew that then, you didn't tell me (HD2).

In fact, in some cases staff would discover that a particular body of knowledge existed in the organisation via an external source. A striking example of this was provided by the same interviewee who claims:

There's an instance recently where someone did a presentation on copyright and it's something that I'm dealing with and I found out that he had done this research through an external resource (HD2).

Hence, the significance of a knowledge generating and sharing tool should become apparent. Whilst the general benefit of the adopting and using a SNS was understood by staff they begrudgingly accept the benefits but proceed to overlook them. A number of perceived benefits of SNS were highlighted by these respondents included:

- greater communication;
- synchronous and asynchronous communication;
- open access;
- easy-to-use forum for academic debate or business discussion; and
- share ideas in an informal environment that encourages creativity.

However, despite these positive perceptions, there was still overwhelming user resistance and rejection of SNS as a KM tool. One of the most interesting arguments presented for the inadequacy of SNS lies in its name, as it was the social aspect of the term which is of the highest concern for the majority of managers:

It implies that it's socialising, that it's a bit of fun and that it's a chance to have a bit of a gossip (HD3).

Some on the other hand were concerned with the concept of networking and perceived it to be another means of developing duplicate bodies of knowledge and recreating existing silos online:

I don't like the term networks, networking suggest cliques to me (AH1).

In terms of KM the interviewees can see the benefits of informal communication and networks, especially in capturing tacit knowledge. Harnessing and utilising tacit knowledge is critical to organisational growth, innovation, creativity and learning, however, the role of SNS were not recognised in aiding the organisation in capturing these:

I've got reservations over it [...]. I think SNS in its term social is more what staff would like to use when they get outside of the organisation (SMT2).

For actively engaged SNS users, having a work profile which they would also use for social purposes outside of work were not an attractive concept:

I wouldn't want to use my home profile as my work profile not that I've got anything on there that I want to hide but I think that's my personal life and they're my personal friends and works quite a separate thing to that (HD1).

Even though there were a number of concerns and some hostility towards the use of SNS as a KM tool, there appears to be a general recognition that SNS would allow discussion, communication and the imparting of knowledge and that it could be beneficial to the organisation. However, the perceived benefits were inadequate to allay the fears and suspicion arising from the terminology itself and the fact that this could be just another management fad. As it is clear that there is an increasing understanding of the possibility of using SNS to enhance business opportunities, however, there is a fear from using this medium as it might be misinterpreted. This why it is important to get the balance right between the social (pleasure) and business use. The solution for this could be using specialised SNS offering much more than just an unmoderated free-for-all. By given a few restrictions in terms of membership and content, SNS as KM tool can provide a valuable informal or formal medium for sharing knowledge which will have a positive effect on increasing innovation and creativity.

## 8. Discussion of the findings

In terms of the development and implementation of a KM strategy, the evidence shows there was clear division of perceptions between the SMT and the rest of the organisation. Whilst the members of the SMT were keen to have a KM strategy, the rest of the management team believe this was not the correct direction for the institution. In addition, since some interviewees were oblivious to the fact that the institution did not have a KM strategy and others were unclear as to what it entails, this ignorance could account for the resistance.

When considered in regards to the size and nature of the institution, the absence of a KM strategy can be detrimental especially due to staff turnover and absences. As it stands, this institution does not fully know what knowledge it has as there are currently no clear mechanisms for knowledge transfer and sharing. Consequently, having KM tools in place such as a SNS would aid the institution in knowing what it knows, who is doing what, where knowledge sources are, as well as where knowledge silos and replications exist.

Whilst companies such as IBM have designed and developed their own SNS, Beehive, the objective of this study was not to suggest such a development but to determine whether the institution would consider using an existing SNS as part of its KM package. Whilst there are benefits from developing an internal system, it was perceived by the researchers that benefits of current systems would outweigh the cost and resources required to develop an internal system. In addition, some interviewees were already members of one or more SNS and consequently were aware of their functionalities. These individuals had established and formed relationships with other users, whether in a professional or social capacity. Having to learn the use of another system may result in resistance to change or even situations where users boycott the entire process.

Quite surprisingly, even though interviewees are members of LinkedIn, a SNS which promotes business connections, they were reluctant to support the idea of having a SNS as a KM tool. This could serve as an indication that interviewees either were not prepared to share knowledge and discuss ideas within the organisation or that there was a lack of understanding of the nature of SNS and the functionalities they present. On the other hand, professional SNS were seen as a means of displaying ones credentials or to represent different interests but not as a means of knowledge

exchange and collaboration. Hence, there are patterns of path dependency where individuals upon facing critical junctures, replicate current practices rather than embracing the full potential of the technology.

Paradoxically, these managers were willing to share knowledge concerning their achievements externally but were reluctant for this information to be authenticated through the establishment of links with others internally. One possible explanation for this may be related to a concern amongst interviewees that additional responsibilities would be added to their already pressing workloads. Conversely, knowledge sharing, networking and self presentation outside the institution may not only lead to external recognition but promotion internally.

## 9. Conclusions

Whilst the role of SNS as a KM tool was seen in general to be beneficial to the institution, like any IS tool there was a general lack of trust of the SMT for their adoption. There was in general, suspicion of the role these sites will play, if any, in the KM process. Quite surprisingly, the ability to use the technology in itself was not a major issue as most respondents were technologically aware and able. However, there were a number of preconceived ideas concerning the suitability and applicability of SNS outside a social setting, as they were considered primarily as a means of self propagation and socialisation.

Consequently, should SNS be adopted for use in this organisation as a KM tool, education and training of users is essential to prevent or alleviate user resistance, arising from initial mind set. In this case, simply changing the name of the tool could prove helpful as some individuals had a mental block to the name itself. For example, from the study it was obvious that some respondents were disturbed or even repelled by the concept of socialising online within a work environment. The idea of SNS also conjures up for some the idea, of exclusiveness which would deter the KM process rather than facilitate or promote it.

Therefore, for effective change and general acceptance of the role of SNS, senior managers need to develop a clear communication strategy, both vertically and horizontally, to promote the benefits and effects these tools have to offer. In addition, there has to be clear SMT support to convince staff of their commitment to the KM process. A gradual cultural shift to the idea of sharing is also essential, where “socialising” or “networking” during work hours is not necessarily bad but could promote and support organisational growth and innovation.

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