

Learning to Share by Reflection-On-Action on an Enterprise Social Media Platform

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Abstract. Enterprise Social Media Platforms are now commonplace in organisations. They are argued to bring benefits, like simplifying work processes, enhance internal communications and reduce internal organisational barriers. Such benefits can be obtained on the assumption that employees naturally engage on a platform and share knowledge. But how to and what to share on an enterprise platform is not always a straightforward task and is a practice that must be learned through sense-making of sharing. Therefore, this challenges the assumption that sharing on Social Media Enterprise Platforms can bring benefits. Consequently, the paper examines the challenges in making sense of the meaning of the practice of sharing. The paper explores a case study on how a County Authority in a Nordic country implemented an Enterprise Social Media Platform and how a group of employees tried to make sense of the practice of sharing by reflection-on-action. The results show that the employees interpreted sharing as an informing practice, resulting in information-overload and disengaged users.

Keywords. Sharing, Enterprise Social Media Platforms, organisation, Norway

1 Introduction

Over the years, Nordic public organisations have implemented Enterprise Social Media Platforms (ESMPs). In 2010, the top management in a County Authority (CA) in a Nordic Country decided to implement one. The main objective was to improve internal communication and simplify work surfaces. Also, the goal was to motivate the CA's employees to replace work practices by transferring work interaction from e-mail to shared work on the ESMP. The platform was embedded with features facilitated for sharing of digital items, user profiles, a news feed, groups, possibilities to follow colleagues, etc. Although the implementation went well, one later experienced a conundrum. The top management saw an increased volume of shared information, but the employees did not adopt the practice of sharing as expected, as there were few traces of collaborative work practices and awareness of an online community.

This paper uses a *qualitative research perspective*, and asks how a small group of employees interpret the meaning of sharing and how they use reflection-on-action to make sense of sharing in an ESMP intended to be the new work surface for roughly about 2,800 employees. To answer the research question, this is analysed over the paper's five parts. The next section addresses a relevant research horizon, the subsequent part outlines methods. Thereafter, the research findings are presented, and the final part concludes the analysis.

2 Relevant research horizon

In short, sharing on social media can be defined as the act to post information. Over the last decade, researchers have tried to conceptualise the meaning of sharing in organisations without having a clear understanding of what is actually shared [1]. In early studies, for example, sharing on Knowledge Sharing Platforms was understood as information that could be coded, stored, and be retrieved by employees. Also, studies focused on making assumptions on knowledge sharing and establishing technological definitions of communities [2]. Scholars explored the conditions and requirements essential to making online communities thrive [3], what characterises “knowledge” [4], distinguishing what motivates users to share knowledge [5], and what role cultural values [6] and social capital play in knowledge sharing processes [7]. This led to an understanding of sharing as a controlled process, omitting that a knowledge-sharing process is an active and relational communication process between two parties [8]. With the arrival of ESMPs, researchers mapped the impact of these technologies, raising new questions about what is to be shared and how to perform sharing. A growing ESMPs research stream shows different experiences. For example, studies find that employees use ESMPs to connect and expand professional networks [9] and researchers chart basic user patterns [10, 11]. Also, researchers examine the challenges of adopting ESMPs. Studies demonstrate how employees still prefer to communicate via e-mail and chat and silently monitor news streams [12]. Experimental papers have used the affordance concept to theorise what benefits ESMPs can provide to understand organisational processes like socialisation and the organisation of work processes [13].

Lacking within the above research stream is an updated *learning perspective* on how knowledge workers learn the practice of sharing, to organise knowledge work. This analytical perspective can be developed by combining the concepts of reflection-on-action, [14] and situated learning [15], viewing them in the light of the learning theory for the digital age, connectivism [16]. Connectivism draws up a number of new principles for learning but assumes that knowledge resides outside us in forms of social structures like databases and in nodes of complex social networks. This means there is a need to focus more on pattern recognition; and the way in which knowledge workers interact on ESMPs can be understood using network learning approaches. This argument is indeed relevant, as knowledge workers interact in a social context characterised by complexity and chaos, which can easily lead to information overload. Confronted with a new disrupted work context, the attention is redirected to how workers can apply a skill set that forces them to reflect on their action in interactive situations on ESMPs. This perspective does not appear to be developed in the current research literature on ESMPs.

3 Methods

The study used a qualitative research strategy, following an explorative research design. The motivation for using it was to gain in-depth knowledge on how the practice of sharing is interpreted and performed on an ESMP by users. The study’s main method was the use of qualitative research interviews following the principles outlined by

Brinkmann and Kvale [17]. Brinkmann and Kvale argue that qualitative research interviews can be used as a means to learn more about a particular phenomenon. Eight singular in-depth and open qualitative research interviews were conducted with eight different people working in the CA. The interviews were one-to-one, meaning that only the researcher and the informant were present in the interview setting. The interviews were semi-structured with the use of a guide and lasted an hour. Each interview was recorded on a digital audio recorder and covered topics that focused on sharing. After completion, the research interviews were transcribed. The data analysis was inspired by an open coding strategy of the interview data, where the main focus was on finding emerging patterns. The participants' perceptions, user patterns and experiences were compared and grouped, with reference to how they used the ESMP. In order to offer the participants a voice, direct quotations are used in the data presented. Data were collected in May 2013 and April 2014.

4 Research results

The results from the data analysis consists of four themes. The themes are based on an interpretive analysis of the participants' use of the ESMP and shows how they use a reflection-on-action approach to frame the organisation of knowledge work.

4.1 Theme 1: Sharing as an enabler for organisational change

The first theme relates to how sharing is interpreted as an enabler for *organisational change*, which is framed from a top management perspective. Here, sharing was used to solve a problem in CA. The motivation for the implementation was to cope with a challenge seen in organisations - e-mail overload and use of various ICTs.

The top-management aimed at simplifying the work surface, as employees worked across several information and communication technologies (ICTs) and stored information in various places. This made it difficult to get an overview. A single site was needed, which could work as the central access point connecting the employees. Introducing an ESMP could resolve the matter, but a new interface would break a work pattern. While the intranet was run as an internal web site, the new design suggested that the ESMP should be the site an employee opened each day with embedded sharing features and URL-links to various information technology (IT)-systems. Afterwards, a discourse emphasising the importance of a sharing culture emerged:

"It was acknowledged that we needed something that could enable us to work with the culture across [the organization], knowledge of each other's work. My responsibility has been to legitimize sharing in the management structure. Parallel to that, we made attempts to raise discussion about organizational culture and work processes internally. Should we establish a greater sharing culture, in the sense that people can easily participate in and reinforce each other's work, or take part in reports, or take part in other kinds of things, take part in the knowledge we have, this requires a culture where [people] actively share."

Translating sharing into a practice proved difficult, as it surfaced as ambiguous:
“It sounds very good. It has a positivity to it, when it’s presented, but not so great when you try it out in practice. You didn’t know exactly what it was. There was this belief that we should change the work culture.”

Later, this awareness amplified. The ESMP initiators realised that the employees seldom started a work process by beginning from scratch—by creating a document that everyone can engage in, for example—but viewed sharing as an *informing practice* of circulating ready-made documents. Sharing was linked to previous publishing habits. The employees were accustomed to an “article format”, meaning that postings on the ESMP had a “news story” label attached to them. User interaction was characterised by seeing the ESMP as a channel where information was “pushed out”, not a platform where one engaged in a two-way dialogue. The employees fulfilled activities that required little commitment, like posting a profile picture, writing status updates, etc. Beyond that, there was little evidence that users participated to share:

“Ninety percent of the information posted on the ESMP is not something that we’ve published. It’s made by the organization. People share when documents are finished. You don’t see many examples where people collaborate on a document, which is part of a work process. That’s where we struggle.”

4.2 Theme 2: Sharing viewed as self-censorship and risk-taking

The second theme shows that sharing is associated with *self-censorship*, as the employees used private and previous experiences from engaging on social media to establish views on sharing. For example, the participants viewed Facebook as a site for “scrolling after fun stuff and setting likes” and Twitter as a place where “you only send URL-links to news you have already read”. Not surprisingly, monitoring online grooming and gossiping for years on social media generated scepticism, producing a belief that sharing is seldom seen as a public two-way communicative practice, but as a means to monitor what others do, although the participants acknowledged the benefits of sharing. Hence, sharing is practiced on the basis of *being informed* and *to inform rather than to engage*, meaning that personal branding and information about oneself disregards participation on the ESMP. Instead, one should share “interesting” and “relevant” items, implying that the value of what can be shared has to be informative and of high quality.

So, the experiences mentioned above create certain boundaries for how one should engage. For example, the participants remarked that appropriate items need to be “work-related”, setting standards for what internal communication should be like. Sharing on the ESMP should be a safe matter as no external audience has access. Findings show otherwise. In fact, sharing is *risk-taking*, which was expressed in the participants’ views on how they are willing to make a work process transparent to others:

“I don’t have a problem with posting something that is not one hundred percent complete. I would have made it clear that this is “work-in-progress” and I want feedback.”

We find examples that sharing can have greater risks, as participants can be criticised. Publishing unfinished work can create misunderstandings:

“One thing is that some of us find it a bit uncomfortable to share things that are not finished, because then we get criticized. If things are just published and not finished, it can cause harm because it creates sanctions on something that it was not intended to be. We have specific discussions within our work areas, documents concerning the management side and on the political aspects, which we publish. When things are at a certain stage, a working document, it is not intended that everybody should see it.”

Data show that participants seek “approval” from their managers to publish content and do not want to be held accountable for what they share. Rather than deciding independently, as the basis for sharing a document, the participants enforce a quality-safety practice where they “ask permission” from someone in the management structure:

“Things that are unfinished and not approved can create panic, when it is a different figure from what you think is going to be on paper. If we begin to rewrite the CA’s economy and everyone can read it, there will be something new to most people. People absorb it, even when it is wrong. It creates a lot of “storm” in your organization, if it is not correct.”

4.3 Theme 3: Sharing in separate digital eco-systems

The third theme illustrates how sharing is accepted when using social media as part of a work practice, showing sharing of work beyond the ESMP. This shows how employees create “*separate digital eco-systems*”, which are used when they perceive that the ordinary ICTs the CA provide are not sufficient to perform their work, a technology adoption taking place “under the radar” of the IT department.

Looking at practice, an informant explained how they combined Dropbox and Google Drive to complete a public procurement. In several cases, the CA works together with the neighbouring municipalities. Here, the CA takes on the role of the leading organiser and acts on behalf of many municipalities to achieve greater benefits. This requires collaboration with colleagues in other municipalities. In this regard, colleagues in municipalities can have different needs and competences, which can lead to long e-mail exchanges and many attached documents. And one can lose the overview. Instead of sending e-mails with attached documents back and forth, they combined various applications to make the work simpler:

“We created a Dropbox account because we don’t have the same e-mail system or share the same case management system. You don’t get Dropbox solutions on the PCs here. The IT department thinks it’s unsecure, [lacking] information security. We need tools to do our job, so we ended up defying that a bit and we downloaded the software to our PCs. I used Google Drive to share documents more efficiently than by e-mail.”

Another example is how Facebook groups are used as information repositories or as a mean to reach particular groups who use the welfare services of the CA. Here, one does not find examples of practice showing sharing between several parties, but how Facebook groups are used as public bulletin boards. Again, sharing is an informing

practice. One employee was a representative in a worker union and interacted with representatives from other CAs. As part of it, they created a Facebook group which enabled them to stay in contact and inform each other:

“I had contact with others with the same role in other CAs. We used the Facebook group to share information that was more or less of the same nature. It was a way to share knowledge on issues of health and safety at work.”

An employee explained how they created a Facebook group to communicate with high school students. As students are in the social media landscape, one concluded that they also needed to be present there in a similar way. After some years of use, the Facebook group is used as a public bulletin board:

“It runs every day. We don’t get many requests. We publish when we have specific information. We were unsure whether it would be an active user channel. I think it’s going to become that in the long run.”

4.4 Theme 4: Sharing performed as an individual informing strategy

The fourth theme shows how sharing is practiced as an *individual informing strategy* where it is enacted as a “push-of-information”, which discourages internal communication on the ESMP. Sharing is rarely practiced as part of a two-way communication process but turns into an informing practice where users publish information that is already stored elsewhere. This creates situations where participants share information, but experience that nobody responds to their sharing. Thus, sharing has little benefit.

This is exemplified by analysing a feature created for sharing on the ESMP, the so-called “rooms”. The room feature is a space for collaboration. Generally, the data show that all participants adopted the rooms to perform simple assignments, but afterwards they experienced challenges. Firstly, the participants created rooms and registered members who worked in the same department or who worked in the same field as themselves. Secondly, findings indicated that uploaded documents were republished information which was already stored in other sites. Also, employees seldom created new documents and started to co-write them in real-time, but they instead uploaded approved documents that were only read for notification purposes. Thirdly, the participants reported little interactivity, like participating and reading discussions. In sum, the participants saw the rooms as *information repositories* rather than sites for *collaboration*.

Later, employees with super-user status—users with administrative roles in the rooms—tried to stimulate interactivity and adopted individual strategies to promote engagement. Looking at practices, a super-user adopted an “online gardener” strategy. She tried to encourage co-workers to engage in the two rooms she administrated. This role-performance is not dissimilar to an automated e-mail notification feature, which is generated when there has been interactivity in a knowledge repository. The user extended this strategy and took on the role of a “sharer-and-pusher of information”, which consisted of sending friendly e-mail reminders when she uploaded something:

“I send an e-mail to everyone who has an interest. Then, I share information with them that it’s posted on the ESMP. I invite them to follow the room. I think I’ve been sending reminders for a year.”

She informed across multiple channels too, but afterwards questioned the value of sharing. She did not know if what she shared was used, a thought shared by another informant:

“I note that there are not many who follow the rooms, after many invitations to others who I think might have an interest in it. Then, do we spend unnecessary time on posting information that people do not read?”

This raised a question of whether the rooms are used in the intended way. For example, after uploading, this informant received telephone calls from co-workers:

“I often get the question, if I also can send them an e-mail, when there is new information in the rooms. We have decided on that, no, we don’t send an extra e-mail. We put it out there and then people must seek it out themselves. I feel that people don’t pay attention to all that is posted in the rooms.”

This user-experience shows a gradual disengagement from sharing, as it vanishes and is overtaken by other assignments seen as more important to complete:

“We have two rooms. I post a lot of information in them. But I do not use the opportunity to follow other rooms, as I had hoped and thought I would. It disappears into my daily work life. When I need information, I don’t find it with the search mechanisms that we have today as we had with the old intranet, although there is more information out there now.”

Informing over a long period of time creates an awareness that sharing has an embedded information overload problem attached to it. This is illustrated by repeatedly performing an informing practice wherein users redirect information that is stored elsewhere, for example on servers or local folders; but they observe that the information is redistributed many times in the rooms. Making information available to create transparency thus leads to other results:

“The intention with the ESMP was that we should move away from local storage of information in our own local folder structures. Everything was to be stored on the ESMP. I’m skeptical of it, because it is such a vast amount of information that it makes it difficult to identify what is relevant. We end up with huge hits when we search, and we spend a lot of time on finding out what is relevant. The most concerning thing, however, is that it has become such a huge volume of information.”

Exposure to too much information leads to users enforcing a personal filter and returning to established work principles like using email to communicate, leading to disengagement and a disapproved view on sharing:

“In the start, when it was brand new, I tried to make use of any opportunity. We had the possibility to create rooms. But afterwards, I failed to follow up all that. In neither the rooms I administer, did I manage to develop anything. I’m rarely there and don’t check the rooms I am a member of.”

This user saw the rooms as an opportunity to create better conditions for interaction with the high schools with which she has frequent contact as part of her work. Much of the daily contact with them consisted of sending general information. Instead of sending

all of that via e-mail, it could be transferred to the rooms, but later the good intentions faded out:

“I haven’t had time to prioritize the rooms. My workday is packed with “to-do tasks”. To sit down to try to use the possibilities and communicate in the rooms, has instead led me not doing that. Now, I don’t bother checking notifications from the rooms I administer or follow or what my colleagues have written in their status updates. I skip that very fast and I go directly to check my e-mails.”

The pattern of disengagement was found in another experience. This user explained that the challenges of generating engagement were related to the ESMP’s user interface itself. For example, it was difficult to ascertain whether the rooms were used by others as there was no panel to show the numbers of visitors. The user also argued that the information shared in the rooms was already available and ready-made in other spaces, which meant that co-workers had it stored in their e-mail inbox:

“The challenge is that there are too many rooms. It’s almost like we have a room for each employee. Then you have to click around a great deal before you find [what] you’re looking for.”

As the participants were uncertain to what extent sharing in the rooms had benefits, other experience indicated otherwise. A user working with accounting explained that the rooms are a “manual”. She was an active user and saw the benefit of retrieving and finding information that had been shared by others:

“For example, I’m working in the accounting system and I find out that I need to get hold of a manual or retrieve information on an account. I go on the ESMP. There, I locate documents or things that are written about the case I’m working on. I’m a member of all the rooms that have something to do with accounting, a factor allowing me to know what we’ve posted and what others ask about.”

The rooms were beneficial in different ways. For example, they were information depositories, where one could find quick answers, as they narrowed down the need for searching. Alternatively, this employee would have to search for the same information in larger web-based databases:

“They are part of a knowledge you can easily use. In accounting, there are clear definitions, clear rules for use. Things that are not so relevant one day, I often get information about in advance. But then I get questions from colleagues working in other departments, who ask about a deadline. What date is set as a deadline for the final reporting? Now, I know where I can quickly get and give an answer back on that. It’s not necessarily that I have that knowledge in my head, but now I have good knowledge of where the answer is located.”

5 Conclusion

In short, research on ESMPs is still in its infancy, but it shows that employees in organisations use ESMPs for online social interaction like connecting and expanding professional networks [9]. Also, researchers have charted basic user patterns [10, 11, 18] and

examined the challenges of adopting ESMPs. A number of studies have tried to theorise the material understanding of ESMPs, like expanding our understanding of the concept of affordance. This has been used to hypothesise what potential benefits ESMPs can provide to grasp organisational processes like socialisation and the organising of work processes [13, 19]. Missing from the ESMP research stream is a *learning perspective* on how users learn to share knowledge. This can be established by looking at the main finding from the study, which suggests filling a gap in the research on ESMPs.

Throughout the analysis, we can establish a contradiction, which is often on display in unsuccessful implementations of new technologies in organisations – end-users do not use the technology as intended. This study finds that an ESMP, intended to simplify the work surface among employees in a public organisation in a Nordic country, gives opposite outcomes among the end-users. Sharing, introduced as a new workplace principle, expected to create transparency and enhance internal communication, creates disengaged users. Instead, sharing is learned to be a practice that is difficult to master, an aspect that is learned by the participants when they attempt to engage on the ESMP and use features facilitated for sharing. In fact, they learn by reflecting on their actions that they seldom engage in a two-way communication process where knowledge is created by collaboration. Rather, they perform an *informing practice* to fulfil the goal of sharing. This informing practice, which is an essential ingredient in creating a knowledge-sharing process, is performed on the premise of informing an audience and to be informed. Moreover, the informing practice is seldom the start of a knowledge process where two users exchange information to create knowledge, for example. Instead, the practice of sharing is a republishing of ready-made and approved official documents found elsewhere in the CA, creating an information overload problem. Furthermore, this gives clues to what is shared, which in this explorative case study relates to information that is already known to an organisation. Sharing proves to be challenging and is associated with great risk-taking for those carrying it out, leading to the enforcement of self-censorship and the construction of separate and private workplaces that the participants deem beneficial to complete their work. In contrast, the users institute personal filters and return to work surfaces which they believe “works”, which in most cases is e-mail. In other words, the meaning of the practice of sharing on the ESMP found in this case study is performed as an informing strategy and used to be informed.

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