

Challenges of the use of Social Networking Services in (German) enterprises

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INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites/services (SNS) are defined by Boyd and Ellison [1] as „web-based services that allow individuals to **construct a public or semi-public profile** within a bounded system, **articulate a list of other users** with whom they share a connection, and **view and traverse their list of connections** and those made by others within the system.”

Since end of 2006 the extent and frequency of the use of services for private social networking have been increasing significantly in Germany. Thus, there is a great interest in German enterprises to replace or extend the Yellow Pages which have so far been used in enterprises as a sort of expertise finding [4] to support the exchange of implicit knowledge (of employees) within and between enterprises. Due to the fact that SNS have been developed just recently, and as the development speed of the services is enormous, experiences with the use of SNS in the enterprise have not yet been analyzed. Thus, there is a lack of understanding for problems / barriers (or lessons learned) concerning when and how to use SNS.

The goal of the research project “challenges of the use of social networking services in the enterprise” is to identify success factors and barriers of the deployment of SNS in German enterprises.

FROM THE WWW ...

From reviewing existing internal and external SNS we have initially extracted **six distinct functionalities (or features) of SNS**, namely (1) identity management, (2) expert search, (3) context awareness, (4) contact management, (5) network awareness and (6) exchange [7]. Based on this categorization we have then conducted an online survey to support the categorization and to rate the importance of the different functions from the perspective of 2650 users of open SNS in Germany.

Main finding of our study (concerning the basic functionalities of SNS) is that the key intention for the usage of a SNS is to keep contact with friends or colleagues (This is in line with [6]). Functionalities to enable this key intention were used most frequently and considered as most important by our respondents [7]. That reflects also the main difference of SNS and their predecessors, the yellow

pages, and the new potential of SNS: There is often no more need to look up someone, people already know each other and know what others are doing, since they are connected in SNS. Another of our findings sets up on this: To be able to keep contact it is essential for a user to be aware of his contacts and to exchange with them. Of our identified functions, (network) awareness and exchange were considered as most important by the users. Moreover 70% of the respondents attached importance to the occasional introduction of new functions, only 12% did not.

... INTO THE ENTERPRISE

Next, we started to work out case studies of several companies that use internal SNS with the final goal to do a cross-case analysis. In semi-structured interviews we identified success factors of the use of the Bluepages (IBM), Harmony (SAP) and the People Pages (Accenture). All of them provide the six distinct functionalities we identified. We started every case study by conducting two interviews with personnel responsible for the introduction of the SNS and for user monitoring, and continued with six to eight interviews with (mostly German) users of the corporate SNS.

The SNS under review differ to a considerable extent with regard to both, its development and deployment process as well as in their subsequent use. While the Bluepages have grown for quite a long period and consistently and are now fully established within the company, the People Pages have just started considerably growing in the last months and Harmony has even not yet done the 'breakthrough'. This gave us the possibility to analyze the different user behavior and to recognize specific success factors and use barriers in the specific context.

SUCCESS FACTORS AND USE BARRIERS

In the following we present some findings of the research mentioned above. We categorized these according to the six dimensions of the (original) Delone and McLean information systems success model [2]. The model is especially appropriate because several dozens of research papers have proven interrelationships among (nearly) all dimensions [3]. Thus, we are using this model because our identified success factors and use barriers (sometimes strongly) interrelate between each other, too.

System quality

The importance of a service that is **simple to use** cannot be stressed enough [e.g. 5]. This is clearly not only true for SNS, but is highly relevant for SNS, too. Hand-in-hand with simplicity is the **integration with other services**. While this was highlighted as very positive by many Bluepages users, the lack of integration of Harmony with the corporate-MSN Messenger and Collaboration Rooms has been a use barrier, as these were seen as competing with Harmony. In addition, the employees expect that the functionalities of the service are **further developed visibly/noticeable**. If not, the users lose their conviction or confidence in the use of the SNS.

Information quality

As for many other application systems, simplicity and a minimum of effort are most important to convince a wide range of employees to use SNS. Besides, the clear recognition of the **potential benefits** is also very important. The difficulty is to find the balance between letting use the SNS as users want to and to put efficiency in the foreground. The results of the three case studies reveal that - contrary to our first conjecture - it is important to put the **business purposes of a SNS in the foreground**. I.e. a SNS that is used very much privately is not taken as seriously as a SNS that is designed for business purposes.

Use

Without users a SNS is not of any use. So it is quite obvious that a critical mass of members regularly using the SNS is necessary to convince potential users. But in addition, our results show that the users of corporate SNS (as well as the users of Internet SNS as our results showed [7]) depend not so much on how many users the SNS has as a whole, but rather on **how many people from the personal network** are using the SNS. In this context, the **awareness of the activities** of the own network can motivate the user to participate more actively in the SNS. At the same time, however, it is necessary to **reassure the users** against the fear of a possible exposure and to protect them by providing possibilities to prevent possible exposure of their data.

User satisfaction

The word of mouth or **recommendations of satisfied** users are extremely important to convince potential users. Hence, the number of users and the intensity of use in Harmony increased extremely, when a function for private invitations was introduced.

Individual impact

As all of the three cases show, the **embedding of the SNS** in everyday use is an important factor for its success. People do not just want a (simplistic) system that could help some time in the future, but one that is of immediate use for their everyday work live. In this context, our results showed that the completeness of the profile is not only a sign of an

open corporate culture and of confidence in the enterprise data protection, but even more by the faith in the personal benefits of SNS.

Organizational impact

In no case the use of the SNS is restricted by means of directives, with the aim to let the users the freedom to decide nature and frequency of use. As the comparison shows an **open corporate culture** may be a key to improve cooperation within the company. But it does not lead automatically to the frequent use of the SNS. It is only effective in conjunction with the above clear recognition of the potential benefits.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

As showed above we studied three companies that use internal SNS. We discovered several success factors and use barriers in the specific context of the case studies and categorized these according to the DeLone and McLean IS success model.

Yet our results are partly limited: We cannot yet make any statements regarding the size of a company that wants to deploy a SNS, nor on the effects of different corporate cultures. There was also no further assessment of the social and organizational measures implemented by the companies, we merely investigated their effects.

Since German enterprises are very hesitating in deploying SNS, we are very interested in learning about other examples of SNS in the enterprise.

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