

# How Might Microblogs Support Collaborative Work?

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## **ABSTRACT**

Microblogs, a relative new phenomenon, are a new communication channel for people to broadcast information that they likely would not do otherwise with existing channels (e.g., email, phone, IM, or weblogs). Microblogging has become quite popular quite quickly, raising the possibility that it may become a new informal communication medium at work. If so, the exchanges it supports may have a variety of impacts on collaborative work, including improved information sharing and expertise seeking, building and maintaining common ground, and enhancing the feeling of connectedness among co-workers. This project is aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of why people microblog as a social activity, exploring the potential impact of these communication activities on collaborative work, and designing microblog tools that may help to at enhance collaborative work.

## **Author Keywords**

Microblog, collaborative work, informal communication.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Microblog is an easy form of communication, powered by online CMC tools (e.g., Twitter, Jaiku, Pownce, and Facebook), that enables users to broadcast and share information, through brief text updates, about their activities, opinions and status, with subscribers (e.g., friends or interested observers) [3]. Microblogging, used to achieve a wide variety of social purposes, has been quickly gaining popularity as an option for online social networking. In Twitter.com, people update their daily life activities with friends/families/co-workers; share information/news and opinions with interested observers; and seek knowledge and expertise in public tweets [3, 5]. Emotionally, people seem to use microblogging to achieve a level of *cyberspace presence*, being “out there” [5] and to feel another layer of connection with friends and the world.

Microblogging offers a new kind of communication channel for people to share information, and may encourage them to share informal content and updates that they would never bother to share via more familiar channels (e.g., email, phone, IM, or blogging). Its broadcast nature, inherited from blogging, gives microblogging its unique communication phenomenon. As information producers, microblog users broadcast interesting things on their own channel to their “subscribed” audience. These are often small little things happening in the user’s daily life, such as where to hang out tonight, interesting news or articles came across, or work status like “been writing a CHI paper”, which users may not bother to select recipients to send in IM or email.

Like in RSS, readers can subscribe to people who microblog, if they believe that these individual “tweets” will be interesting to them (the term tweet is adopted from Twitter). Checking what is happening to others is a pervasive human interest, as evidenced by their frequent visits to general social networking sites like Facebook [4]. As for blogging in general, voluntary readership allows users to check others’ updates when convenient, not intrusive (no one is forced to pay attention), and no one needs to respond unless they wished to [6].

The brevity of microblog posts make them easy to update and read. Its pervasive accessibility (e.g., from website, browsers, and mobile phones) allows authors to update their experiences and thoughts instantly, as things happen and thoughts cross their minds. Readers can check others’ updates when they get a moment (e.g., in the airport, on the train, or in between of two meetings).

## **POTENTIAL IMPACT ON COLLABORATIVE WORK**

These unique characteristics of Microblog describe a new informal communication medium that might be useful for co-workers who want to update their own, or to be aware of others’, work-related information and expertise, build common ground, maintain a feeling of connectedness and expand social networks at organization. In my PhD research project I will be exploring this potential through a field study of people who twitter with co-workers in an organization. Drawing from informal conversations with individuals in organization, we discuss our preliminary understandings about the roles Twitter plays at work and how it is different from other communication channels in organizations.

Like in social life, there are many small little things at work that people would like to share with others, get feedback about, or monitor. Though work-related, such information is often personal or trivial to some extent that people won't bother to share with others though IM, email, or discussion forum. However, small informal exchanges, as documented in the classic water cooler studies, are crucial for facilitating collaboration among co-workers [1, 7].

For example, suppose a salesman microblogs that he "had a hard time setting up a demo on client site". He had a bad day, and wants to share such experience with someone and get feedbacks. However, he is not likely to interrupt others' work in the afternoon with an IM message; at the same time, this news is not worth an email to a shared mail-list; and he would not consider taking time to write a serious corporate blog about it (blogging is being taken more seriously at work than at social [2]). But he finds it easy and convenient to share this brief update in Twitter. Later on, he receives two replies from his co-workers saying that they had experienced similar problems before. One of them even initiates a discussion for sharing such experiences by inviting other sales persons. Without the microblog communication option, these opportunities for expressing feelings about "small" issues, getting supportive feedback, and even exchanging experiences with interested parties over a longer term, might not be realized.

My preliminary discussions with organizational users suggest that Twitter may help in building common ground and maintaining a feeling of connectedness among co-workers. Marketing people often post work related news and articles in Twitter to share with others. People replying to a co-worker's updates/opinions sometimes are just alerting him/her that they read it or agree with the opinion to a greater or lesser extent. In another case, a product manager needs to collaborate with marketing and sales people. By reading their work-related updates in Twitter, he may gain insight into how the teams work.

Some individuals also reported that they might choose to update even more of their work-related activities and would like to be aware of similar things from co-workers, if there was a local Twitter-like tool inside their company. For example, a salesman could provide an update of "working on a Pepsi project", and others who know about Pepsi or have worked with Pepsi in different ways may reply to him, and further conversations may be invoked. However, they hesitate to include project- or client-specific information on a public feed, because of company security concerns.

In sum, people use Twitter at work to keep up with what's new and what's happening with one another, and to share and exchange information needed. It provides a new informal communication channel complementary to other media (e.g., IM, email, phone, weblog, or face-to-face).

## ISSUES AND DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

Though microblogging has the potential for enabling new channels for informal communication among co-workers, people are often not sure what to share when they begin to microblog. One implication is that new users might form categories related to their collaborative work and job activities, and that these categories may prompt updates relevant to collaborative work.

Privacy is another concern when people microblog at work. For example, Twitter sends a user's updates to all his/her subscribers. An employee may have concerns of what to update if his boss is in this readers list. A manager may hesitate to update because he may not want all his team members to know what he has been doing. This can be improved by providing users an easy way to set up recipient groups for broadcasting different types of information.

Integration of microblogging inside and outside a company is another challenge. A sales manager may want to use microblog to maintain his awareness with his co-workers inside the company, and keep in touch with his sales partners and other friends outside the company. Rather than maintaining several different microblog accounts, users may prefer a single system for all purposes. Other important issues must also be addressed, including security issues (work activity updates may be only shared within the organization.)

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