Social networking tools for rural BPO?

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**Introduction**

In this early position paper, we want to contribute to the discussions around using social networking tools (SNT) to support workplace activity. To date the greatest success of such tools has been outside of the workplace. However their popularity, especially Facebook, and their ability to connect people in a ‘light weight’ way i.e. enabling people to stay in touch without having to put too much effort in, means that research is turning to how they might be put to use in the workplace. In this paper we spotlight the modes of interaction among employees of a rural Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) company in Tamil Nadu, India and examine them to illustrate why we believe that SNT could be a possible platform for the articulation of “community” reformulated in the context of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) mediated distributed work production. The field study was carried out in September/October 2009 and so analysis is in its earliest stages, we are not therefore at a stage of presenting full study findings or implications for design. Rather we are presenting this work as a talking point to explore these issues further within the workshop.

**Social networking in work organizations**

Recent years have witnessed the appearance of Web based infrastructures named Social Networking Tools (SNT), which offer a set of functionality for connecting with other people and holding conversations with them on a on-going, on-line basis. The most popular of them is, at this time, Facebook, which offers a directory of people and their friend networks together with basic communication tools like email, groups, events and chat. Additionally, and many posit this has been a key success factor, it offers a dynamic notification service, which continuously provides updates on the activities of friends.

Given the success outside organizational boundaries, recently adaptations have been developed and tried in work environments, such as Beehive (DiMicco, 2008). Beehive is a system, which has been tested internally at IBM, which like Facebook allows user profiling and the possibility to share content. It was deployed internally in IBM, enabling the authors to explore its impact. It has 30.000 user subscriptions that were studied in the work reported in (DiMicco, 2008). In summary, the system was shown to be an instrument, not as much to stay in contact with ones daily workgroup, but to have stronger bonds with ones ‘weak ties’ and to reach out to other employees not currently known. In particular the study has shown the potential of this type of system in creating a stronger sense of belonging to the organization through the strengthening and widening of intra-organisational social connections. As reported in the study the following user statement seemed to be a recurrent theme in the collected feedback: “Beehive, by design, helps me connect to people personally, which helps me to like these people more, which makes me want to work with them”.

These types of systems offer a high potential for community building, since they are informal environments with easy to use interfaces, similar to the ones used outside work. What the current studies do not yet examine is how sustainable these systems are, e.g. if over time they tend to flourish or to die,
and on the basis of which factors, and whether they function as informal exchange areas where employees can share and develop their work practices and find support when needed. In the context of a rural BPO setting in India the argument for such tools becomes all the more complex.

Method & study site

The data to be discussed came from a field study of a BPO company (BPOCo) which is run as a rural inclusive enterprise, that is, a company which aims to be profitable whilst at the same time providing white collar jobs to people in rural India, more specifically in Tamil Nadu. The field study was carried out as part of a larger study of rural-inclusive enterprises in September and October 2009. In total around 10 days were spent studying BPOCo, 4 days in one of their rural offices, in a small town in south-west Tamil Nadu (population around 50,000; literacy higher than the average at 73%) and 6 days in their Headquarters in Chennai. The method was primarily observational supplemented by some in situ interviews, plus visits to some of the employees homes. The rural site visit was made by a ethnographer, who did not speak Tamil, and an anthropologist, who although not a native Tamil speaker had a high level of fluency. The language of the work was mostly English, however in the rural site the employees talked amongst themselves in Tamil and had a much better level of reading and writing than spoken English. In the HQ many of the conversations were also in English as some of the staff were Hindi, rather than Tamil speaking, making English the common language. All the emails, instant messages and so on were in English. Data collection was primarily through field notes, with some audio recording of interviews, and photographs.

BPOCo is a young company, not more than two years old and like most young SMBs operates under very tight margins. They operate a distributed, rural working model – that is HQ has a business development team who get in new contracts, the work is then split up and allocated across various rural centres according to staff skills, availability and so on. The actual workflows vary on a job-by-job basis. Thus one project may be handled by people in several different rural centres and coordinated by HQ who collate, check and pass on the work to the customer. Alternatively, employees may interact directly with the client and projects may be coordinated from any of the company’s rural centers (with just an overview from HQ).

BPOCo has a strong philosophy of technology adoption to enable the distributed, rural working model to function. However, this technology needs to be lightweight and cheap. They currently primarily use 1) a web based mail and messenger tool which shows who’s online, enables IM chat to be started with online people and emails to be sent; 2) GoogleDocs for sharing documents - mainly individually crafted Excel sheets - for work planning, coordination, tracking and so on; and 3) OpenOffice. BPOCo carries out a variety of outsourcing work across a number of domains. The work that we saw being undertaken included translation, transcription, checking web sites for broken links, map making (filling in and correcting of details on online maps), and digitising insurance forms. They take on labour intensive work which companies are keen to outsource, much of which is online.

Requirements from rural social settings

There were a number of features of the work which suggest that the introduction of SNT designed with reference to their workflow had the potential to enhance the quality of their daily work interaction. A clear enabler here is their adoption and intense use of a mixture of CMC tools (IM and email) plus GoogleDocs as a way of coordinating and tracking the day-to-day work between distributed teams. These tools are supplemented by mobile phones and some face-to-face visits, either by HQ to the rural sites, or

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1 BPOCo is a fictional name for the purposes of anonymity.
by team leaders to HQ. All acknowledge that these face to face visits are important for creating a sense of community. A key constraint however, when thinking about design is the rural environment – although the company is at pains to ensure connectivity (with electricity generators for back-up and Internet from a variety of different ISP’s) at times centres do go offline. This is seriously disruptive to a lot of the work – much of which is actually carried out online – and has particular consequences when the aggregate job has tight time constraints (work therefore will need to be farmed out to other rural centres which are still online and tasks interchanged to avoid productivity loss). Since currently tracking documents etc. are stored online, they are only available from centres with connectivity, to help with work coordination and exchange access to the ‘last updated’ version offline could be of benefit in contingency planning.

As described in the literature, SNT have some potential advantages over their existing tools. They provide an integrated communication environment which both 1) provides information about what people are doing (status, photos, what groups you’ve joined and so on), and 2) provides a set of communication tools, enabling one-to-one or one-to-many communication.

Below we will outline some of the areas where we believe adapted SNT can help.

1. Lightweight coordination and tracking of work

GoogleDocs and the integrated web mail/messenger interface provide good functionality for communicating with one another in a lightweight way and for sharing information. However useful these tools are, at the moment the coordination and tracking sits outside of the work itself. Much of it is done through the creation and updating of Excel sheets which reside on GoogleDocs. This work is time consuming and sits wholly outside the work of task completion. Since most of the work is computerized and much of it web-based, one might be able to create lighter weight coordination and tracking tools by linking the coordination to the doing of the work. SNT enable the creation of small plug-in applications and it would be interesting to investigate whether it is possible to quickly and easily program tools to collect information from the websites on which the employees are working and use this to feed into the SNT as a way of monitoring ongoing work. To illustrate, different jobs have different coordination mechanisms – for example, in map making employees choose from a list (on an shared Excel sheet) which feature they will work on next, e.g. drawing a particular highway, and they mark up that they are doing this work by annotating the Excel sheet. After completing the task, they go back and mark up that it is finished. At the moment, someone first creates these extensive Excel sheets after which the employees have to update them. SNT might offer a different way of doing this coordination work: the list of tasks would still need to be created manually, but it might be created on a Work Group page and be linked to the internet map making application. Employees can select the job from the list (which would then appear on their personal page), ideally this would take them to the mapmaking application, where they would complete the task. On selecting the next job the previous job could be considered complete (or they could assign it a status e.g. incomplete or stalled). We are not suggesting that this linking between applications is necessarily a simple thing, rather we are raising it for investigation. Certainly since BPO jobs change over time, it would need to be easy and lightweight to link between the SNT and the work applications. As well as tracking the progress of the job, this mechanism would enable a lightweight way of tracking individuals work – which currently is done by manual analysis of the spreadsheets and by individuals and coordinators tracking their work each day.

Another coordination mechanism is assigning tasks by rota. This rota is emailed to all employees to check at the start of their shift. Again, it could be created on the Work Group page and individuals parts of it shown on their personal pages.

Work Group pages, if linked to the applications for doing the work could also show what had been done, what was left to do, if behind or ahead of targets and so on – all this should require less additional work than currently and provide at-a-glance monitoring of the jobs split between distributed teams.
2. Staying in touch with one another to get the work done

This is not an area where SNT will likely provide much advantage over existing tools, which already provide good functionality e.g. for seeing who is online and contacting them. Often if the person required isn’t on-line themselves, they will ask a colleague who they know is located in the same office if they are around and get them to come online. However, the linking in with the work tasks might additionally inform workgroup communication.

3. Promoting Identity

The employees of the BPOCo are new entrants to the white collar work organisational set up hitherto spatially detached from their lives in faraway metros. In going to work and in participating within its work processes the socio-cultural distance they cross is not so much mediated by time and distance as it is by an emerging sense of self guaranteed by this upward mobility. Yet their work and progress demands a skilful navigation through various barriers of language, professional work culture and new (and rapidly changing) media and technologies of communication. One of the ways this could be done is through home and Work Group and even centre pages. Employees could create a home page – with a photo and status options, plus opportunities for selfrepresentation which would allow sharing of backgrounds and interests. This could help people in distributed teams get to know one another more and allow for more meaningful interactions, where occasions to meet face-to-face are very limited, yet they often have to work closely. The IM and email would need to be integrated into this system to provide the sort of seamless interface they already have. This paper examines the possibility of addressing such spaces of flows (cf. Manuel Castells) within the work practices of distributed project teams for promoting a sense of self and identity.

4. Promoting the organisation

There are a number of constraints that the organisation is working under. It is still a young SMB, with tight margins, whose work processes are evolving as they gather experience and expand their operations. The company aims to not only sustain itself but also to grow. Maintaining high levels of productivity among the project teams is consequently both a key factor and a strategy. They therefore need to create an atmosphere of efficient communication between HQ and the different project teams as well as within each team i.e. between project leaders and their team members who are often in geographically separate locations. Difficult decisions made for example with regard to a change in the bonus scheme must be communicated in an atmosphere of conviviality to the employees so that they can understand the reasons behind the management’s action to mitigate its negative impacts. There is a perceived need to create a sense of belonging to the organisation. There is also the aim of creating amiable conditions of work., without necessarily the budgets to lavish on either infrastructure or wages. Given that, work places are as much spheres of interaction and technological negotiation as they are physical sites. Creating a greater sense of the organisation using workflow based SNT would very likely reduce the distance between the urban HQ and the rural centers.

Also as a young company, and one that reflects on its own practice, it is in the process of establishing its patterns of management – it needs to get feedback from employees and communicate potential changes to them. At the moment they do this through a series of local meetings (which one wouldn’t want to change) but also a series of memos, which are printed out and struck to the wall. These memos, interestingly, have an informal flavour – being rather discursive and conversational. Discussion boards on the SNT could enable multi-way (as well as single) conversations in this vein to get employee feedback and to promote relationships and lines of communication across the organisation.

Indeed the idea that the introduction of SNT into the workplace in a rural BPO organisation as a
conscious strategy to mitigate alienation among its workers is compelling enough for further investigation into the ways in which it promotes notions of “community” in the workplace. It is amply evident from initial findings that individual workers employ a variety of tactics in everyday work practice (cf. Certeau) that allow for seamlessness in a virtually connected environment. Indeed, given that the company’s work ethic demands “never to be unreachable” the role of interpersonal exchange becomes all the more significant.

Summary

Given that project teams at the rural BPO’s use GoogleDocs and web mail/messenger one could imagine a enhanced version of these tools which connect ongoing work activities, communication tools and information about oneself. Idea would be to facilitate the work and create a greater sense of community given that they are at remote sites with limited opportunity to travel. At the same time enabling the tracking and coordination of the work through the tools themselves.

One could imagine these technologies as having some of the functionality of a lightweight MIS. But one of the crucial things here is that the technology is collaborative – so the emphasis is on not even just two-way information flow, but multi-way information flow (between teams and HQ, between coordinators and HQ, between team members, from local managers to team members, between the whole company, from HQ to whole company).

By examining the possible ways in which SNT may be integrated into the workflow of a rural BPOCo, it is hoped to gain insights into the modes of articulation of “community” through the promotion of mutual work experiences, aspirations and goals.

References

