Enterprise Social Networks and Their Use for Informal Collective Learning

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Résumé :

Le recours aux médias sociaux et à l’utilisation d’outils collaboratifs en ligne s’est accru dès 1997 avec une pénétration progressive au sein des entreprises, qui, de plus en plus, intègrent leurs propres réseaux sociaux en interne. Dans cet article, il s’agit d’analyser l’impact de ce type d’utilisation sur la manière dont nous interagissons, travaillons et apprenons en sein de l’entreprise. Pour cela, nous avons suivi la cas de la mise en place d’une plate-forme collaborative, appelée Workplace, au sein de l’entreprise Danone soutenu par une université d’entreprise. Son fonctionnement, inspiré des réseaux sociaux, a été choisi afin de permettre la création d’une « communauté d’apprenants ».

Dans cet article, il s’agit de proposer une synthèse issue de notre mémoire de Master. Dans le cadre de ce travail, nous avons proposé d’examiner les tensions entre les attentes de l’université d’entreprise et les utilisations réelles de ce réseau social par les salariés afin de comprendre comment les utilisateurs parvenaient à s’approprier les fonctionnalités de cette plate-forme dans le cadre de situations dont le but était de favoriser l’apprentissage collectif.

Nos résultats principaux montrent que, la plupart des utilisateurs connaissent l’interface de Workplace à cause de sa ressemblance à Facebook et en ont des utilisations similaires. Cependant, un accompagnement serait nécessaire afin d’encourager la mise en œuvre d’apprentissages informels et collectifs en réseau.

Mots clés :

Apprentissage entre pairs, Apprentissage informel, Formation d’adultes, Réseaux

1 Introduction

Technological development and the use of social media tools has accelerated since 1997, with the creation of the first social networking site, SixDegrees.com (Boyd & Ellison, 2007),
Wikipedia in 2001 ('Wikipedia’, 2017), and YouTube in 2005 (Fitzpatrick, 2010). This technology revolution has not gone unnoticed by companies, who are also beginning to implement their own internal social networks (Hootsuite Media, 2017) in order to exploit the power that seems to be intrinsic to these platforms. This rapid expansion of technology has also impacted the competencies necessary for individuals and business to succeed. Less and less, do we need to know information, and more and more do we need to know where to find information instead. (Siemens, 2005) The research described here examines one such case.

1.1 Context

Danone, a French company in the food industry, put in place a strategy to respond to this changing landscape. One of their objectives is to become a learning organization by 2020, one which learns and transforms, in order to be agile and competitive. (Senge, 1992) Danone implemented Workplace, a social networking site for business created by and modeled from Facebook, as part of this strategy in the fall of 2016.

The research presented here was conducted as part of a master’s thesis, being completed during an internship with Danone Academy, in Paris, France. Danone Academy is Danone’s corporate university, responsible for global training programs and the implementation of the company’s digital learning strategy. Danone’s goal to be more agile and learn more quickly was implemented in the corporate university through the learning ambition of “One Learning a Day.” According to the director of Danone Academy at the time of the study, it is based on Morgan McCall’s 70/20/10 learning model. The One Learning a Day model breaks learning down into 60% on the job, 20% networking, 10% digital learning, and 10% traditional classroom learning. It is in this context, that Danone Academy directors are interested in potential applications for Workplace.

1.2 Research Questions

Because this tool is relatively new and no learning strategy is yet in place, there are many questions to be asked. In this research, two of these are addressed in order to identify tensions between the tool’s current use versus expectations from the company’s learning leadership team and ultimately propose concrete actions that the enterprise university could take to align usage and expectations. In what ways is this tool, which is said to be collaborative, currently being used? What are the expectations for Workplace vis-à-vis learning from the point of view of Danone’s company university directors? The hypothesis formed is that, under certain conditions, the implementation of an enterprise social network can lead to informal collective learning.

In order to respond to these questions, interviews were conducted with Danone’s corporate university directors to find out more about where the company stands in regards to Workplace for learning. A questionnaire was sent out to Danone employees to gather information about how employees talk about their use of the platform, and finally group activity, in the form of digital footprints, was collected and analyzed to find out how employees are currently using Workplace.

2. Theoretical Framework
2.1 Informal Learning

There are three types of learning that can be distinguished in the literature: “Formal,” “non-formal,” and “informal.” Formal learning is typically organized by an institution, based in a classroom, and often provides some kind of certification. Non-formal learning relates to training and learning activities which take place outside of this official system, such as company training or training provided by various organizations. (Schugurensky, 2010). Finally, informal learning is everything else, which makes the notion more than a little vague. It is defined mostly by what it is not (formal and non-formal.) As such, there are a number of different definitions, influenced by various theories. Typically, researchers approach informal learning from one of two angles, (1) as a continuum, where formal and informal are in opposition; or (2) as a hybrid model, where the three forms overlap and change in function to the situation. (Cristol & Muller, 2013)

I have chosen to focus on the use of Workplace for informal learning because it is likely to be the type of learning that is most present on the site and makes up the majority of learning proposed in Danone’s “One Learning a Day” ambition, at least 80%. Additionally, it is this informal learning which occurs in communities and teams that drives organizational learning. (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002)

2.2 Connectivism

In his theory of connectivism, George Siemens explains that learning (which he defines as practical knowledge) is the result of a connection between diverse sources of information. (Siemens, 2005) He postulates that the way we learn has necessarily changed due to new technology and the rapid creation of new knowledge. It is on the social level, with the creation of connections in social spaces, that we find the effects of technologies, such as mobile phones and social media applications on our ability to know. (Siemens, 2014)

While this creation of connections in social spaces may start at the level of the individual, it feeds teams and communities where that individual acts, thus creating a cycle for developing knowledge which allows organizations to stay up to date. (Siemens, 2005) The challenge for social networks is for that information and those communities to be available to the people who need them, which also brings about a number of technical challenges.

But what exactly constitutes a community? How is it different from a team? What is the impact of technology on those mechanisms?

2.3 Teams and Communities

If we start from the words themselves, what separates communities from teams is their purpose. A community is a group of people with a common interest (CNRTL, 2012a), where a team is a structured group with a finality or common work (CNRTL, 2012b). At their core, they are groups which are capable of learning together, but the distinction is important because both can be found in a company’s social network, within which they serve different functions due to the nature of the people who make them up and their purpose.

2.3.1 Teams

A team is typically a small group of people with a common goal. They may be temporary or
longstanding. (Harvey, Millett, & Smith, 1998) Team learning can be defined as the processes by which a group creates knowledge for its members and itself as a system, as well as for others. (Kasl, Marsick, & Dechant, 1997) However, learning is a secondary effect, behind the work that is being done by the team. It is team longevity that permits the formation of learning processes, as described by Siemens. However, not all teams will learn because they may be dissolved once a project is finished, thus not having the time necessary to develop the team culture and processes required for systems learning.

Devuyper, Dochy and Van den Bossche proposed a circular systemic model for team learning which demonstrates how teams learn by taking inputs from systems which surround the group, the work the group has already completed, and information coming from outside of the team. (Decuyper, Dochy, & Van den Bossche, 2010) In their model, sharing and collaboration within the team is essential, but they also include the introduction of material from outside, referred to as boundary crossing. This activity can consist of research or the transmission of information, views or ideas with others (individuals or groups.) Boundaries are also not limited to teams, but can be physical, mental or organizational. (Kasl et al., 1997)

Workplace is a digital space in which group members can share, and thus co-construct and contribute to team knowledge and competencies, but perhaps more importantly, it offers the opportunity to cross boundaries.

2.3.2 Communities

In the research on communities, several types have emerged, including communities of interest, practice, learning and captive :

*Communities of interest* are groups which are formed around a common subject, where the objective is to share information amongst members. (Henri, 2015) These communities can exist to allow for information exchange or be goal oriented. The difference between the two lies in the goal of learning within those communities. Communities of interest are designed to construct knowledge for individual use, where goal-oriented communities are a co-operative effort to elaborate new information for the use of the collective. (Henri & Pudelko, 2003)

*Communities of practice* are those groups which are formed around a specific profession or practice. The objective is to share information and knowledge about the profession itself. (Wenger, 1998) These communities of practice provide the infrastructure for the construction of a learning organization (Wenger et al., 2002) via the development of new practices and knowledge. (Henri & Pudelko, 2003)

*Learning communities* can also be divided into two categories: those which are organized and controlled by an instructor (Henri & Pudelko, 2003), such as those seen in distance education, or a collective of learners who have the intention of learning together. (Cristol, 2017)

*Captive communities* differ from the others in that they are centralized around a point of power, or authority. (Baron & Zablot, 2017) In the case of an enterprise social network, it can be said that the entirety of the network members forms a captive
community, but they can also exist in smaller units, such as departmental groups.

Table 1: Types of Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Type</th>
<th>Identifying Traits</th>
<th>Learning Interactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Common subject, often related to hobbies</td>
<td>Knowledge exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Common learning goal</td>
<td>Knowledge construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Common profession</td>
<td>Knowledge sharing and appropriation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captive</td>
<td>Common authority</td>
<td>Top-down communication of information</td>
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The formation of these communities with a company’s social network allow it to address issues of knowledge creation, sharing and management. Teams can be temporary and changing, as such information can easily be lost once a team ceases to exist, however individuals belonging to communities such as those listed above can help preserve that information. (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002)

3. Methodology

For this study, I implemented three methods of data collection: semi-directive interviews, a questionnaire, as well as examining activity from a variety of groups on Workplace (digital footprints). I elected to use various methods for a few reasons: first, I was investigating two separate populations. The sizes of these populations required the approach to be adapted for the sake of practicality. Second, I wanted to collect the opinions of employees, but I also wanted to observe the activity directly to get a more complete picture. Finally, the usage of multiple strategies permitted me to work with new methods, which I felt pertinent to my development as a researcher in the context of a master’s thesis.

In order to respond to my first research question, regarding the expectations of Danone Academy for the usage of workplace for informal learning, I conducted interviews with 4 Danone Academy directors. Questions included the role of Danone Academy in informal learning, ideal usages of Workplace by employees and whether or not they felt Workplace was a good investment for the company.

A survey request was sent out via multiple channels, open to all Danone employees. I estimate that the requests reached around 900 employees and received a 13% response rate during the time it was available (June 26 – July 12, 2017.) The survey consisted of open questions regarding Workplace usage, participation in groups, and learning that resulted from using Workplace. It also included a section asking how frequently the respondent performed certain actions, such as using private messaging, sharing videos or discussing with team members via the platform.

Lastly, I collected traces of activity from 5 different types of groups in Danone’s Workplace network. These traces included posts, comments and group descriptions looking back over the span of 6 months. There were some limitations, in that the group needed to be open,
and thus viewable by non-members. I chose groups that I could classify as (1) a learning community, (2) a community of practice, (3) an unsuccessful community, (4) a community of interest, (5) and a team.

4. Results

4.1 Danone Academy’s Expectations

One element was common between all of our respondents: Workplace represents a great opportunity for Danone Academy, but its potential is unverified. Some possible uses included informal learning, collaboration, communication and user-generated content. Another commonly cited use was the ability to build communities within the organization that could self-regulate. All four directors agreed that the department was not in a position to play their role, one going as far to say that it’s the department’s last chance before becoming obsolete.

Indeed, changes in how we interact with knowledge and with others has rapidly evolved, and the fact that it is likely to continue (Siemens, 2005) leads me to question the efficacy of traditional training methods in today’s world. If learning professionals do not adapt to these new forms of technology, what will happen to the profession? In this context, this is seen as a defining moment for Danone Academy, but one that must be fought for.

"The danger today is that a lot of people think technology is a luxury and not a necessity. […] They’re saying we need to save money, investing in new systems is just one of the quick wins to take off the table and say let’s stop investing in this. This is a nice to have. […] we need to convince them of the importance of Workplace as a learning tool and to be able to put more money into the investment of finding solutions to the problems we have today from fully implementing Workplace. I mean fully imbedded into learning."

4.2 Evaluation and Ideal Usage

Opinions on how exactly to evaluate Workplace varied between the interviewees, but was seen as vital to all. Some propositions were to measure impact on business, community activity, communication reach (how many people see a particular publication), and quantitative measures in a “big data sense.”

When asked to detail how employees should, ideally, be using Workplace, two interviewees did not initially wish to answer. They felt that prescribing correct behavior would stifle creativity. Overall, three themes emerged in each of the interviews: collaboration, sharing and boundary crossing activities.

"Ideally, I guess I would say you know three things: connect, contribute..contribute [in the] bigger sense of share […], the hardest step is the collaborative part. Sharing is not collaboration. Collaboration is co-building on the platform. Being able to formulate and improve on ideas that you share through the connections that you make and actually using the platform to help foster those ideas. That’s, for me, the key to it."

4.3 Communities of interest and leisure at work – an inconclusive debate

There was also a good deal of difference of opinion regarding the use of communities of
interest and leisure, such as “rock climbing or photography.” One interviewee said that since there are ways to engage in these activities outside of Workplace, she did not see the interest in these communities at work.

It’s true then you can be with people that have the same interests, throughout Danone and that gives you a sense of belonging that is a lot stronger than not having it, but all in all, I don’t know if it is worth it to invest in a platform that is bringing that.

However, she also stated that it does have the benefit of allowing us to see colleagues as people. On the other side of the debate, a different interviewee stated that she saw no problem, especially if it allowed employees to discharge their “cognitive load” before returning to work. In fact, one employee responded to a question regarding how he/she uses Workplace by saying that:

“For me, it is a window of oxygen so as to not weary of work.”

However, the impact of these groups, which some consider distractions, and their impact on employee effectiveness vs. informal learning gains are difficult to measure at this point.

4.4 Technical challenges

A last element that came out during the interviews were concerns regarding technical difficulties, such as how to link activity in Workplace with the learning management system, but most especially how to find useful posts.

“So when I search for something, I don’t always get what I want. You really need to remember who was the person, so I can find it.”

“You have to be quite disciplined in hashtags if you want people to find information.”

Currently, the platform relies on users adding hashtags (#) with keywords to their posts, which allows for those publications to be indexed and searched.

To summarize, it seems that Danone Academy wants to see Workplace used for social learning via the creation of communities. In fact, while communities were cited over and over again, team learning never came up, which is interesting because Workplace is, at its core, intended to facilitate work. I believe that there are three potential reasons that this element was not included: (1) they believe that it is not part of their responsibilities; (2) linking people through communities is more efficient, as opposed to attempting to facilitate team learning, where each team may have its own specific needs; (3) or perhaps the usage of Workplace by teams is weak, so it does not come up as a potential lever for learning.

4.5 Workplace usage among employees

4.5.1 Varied use in teams

In fact, 25% of employees who responded to the questionnaire listed team interaction as one of their uses. However, up to 54% said that they use Workplace to communicate with their team members several times a week or more. Of those who do claim to participate in team groups, they said that they use it most frequently to share best practices and work-
related documents and photos. When trying to select groups to analyze for this project, there were far fewer team groups than communities of practice and interest. Two possible explanations for this: because teams are typically centralized at Danone, the need to collaborate with people in other locations is rare. This means that having a physical space to collaborate is easy, and thus a digital space is unnecessary. Second, if teams wish to use a digital space to store files, there are other tools available that also serve this function. Most respondents stated that they rarely or never use Workplace for document sharing and storage.

However, there is still an important use of these team groups to share best practices. In the Danone Academy Leadership group, 50% of the activity was dedicated to the sharing of articles and videos that members deemed pertinent. However, this number dropped to 8% in the group for a sales team based in France, responsible for in-store displays. Members share pictures of displays that they created, which often generate likes from other team members, but rarely comments. However, an evolution in the group’s practices could be seen over time. As new ideas from one person would be incorporated and improved upon in other team members’ displays. In line with Seimen’s theory of constructivism, there was also some evidence of evolution within practices of other teams. For example, after a sales team in Canada began incorporating fruits into their yogurt displays, a similar pattern began emerging in a sales team located in Northern Africa. While it is not possible to say conclusively that the one influenced the other, it does point to the possibility that actionable knowledge is crossing the network successfully through the use of photographs.

4.5.2 Numerous communities of interest

When asked about participation in communities of interest, only 21% said that they participated in these groups. However, almost all of those who do participate, do so in multiple communities of interest. 35% of these groups were linked to work, but not considered a community of practice or team, but were rather related to their location or internal initiatives. 65% were related to leisure activities, such as crafts, photography, and mountaineering.

The community of interest analyzed for this study is a group which is linked to Danone’s initiatives of health, diversity and a clean planet. One example of activity in this group was sharing an effort to not use plastic during the month of July. The publication was seen by 439 employees, liked by 15 and one person said in the comments that she decided to participate in order to help reduce waste. Another publication shared work done by a team in Argentina to open a new nutritional health center. In the comments, a call was organized to share more information about the initiative with an employee in Egypt.

4.5.3 Strong participation in communities of practice

Communities of practice are rather popular, with 52% of respondents reporting participating in communities that concern their profession. The most popular type of activity in these groups is to share their own work with people working in their domain. In one community of practice, related to digital marketing, members shared examples of their own work (or their
team’s work), tools that they had found useful, and examples of work that came from other companies. Discussion on these publications were usually related to implementation and use.

4.5.4 Unseen learning

Examples of collaborative interactions and co-construction are spread out in these communities, with only a few interactions during a week in some groups, to long silences broken up by a flood of new publications and comments in others. In the failed learning community, there was a gap of 3 months in activity.

55% of respondents specifically mentioned participating in activities related to informal learning, such as sharing, collaborating and boundary crossing. However, few people interact “in public,” via publications or comments. The majority of this activity takes place in Workchat, Workplace’s instant messenger, which most employees report using several times a day. I posit that this pattern of activity may come from a lack of psychological security. Two respondents went as far as to say that they do not participate because they are too new and therefore have nothing important to add.

There is also a lack of understanding as to what constitutes learning amongst employees, despite a great effort to communicate the different modes of learning via the “One Learning a Day” ambition. For example, 70% of participants said that they consult information, videos or shared articles at least several times a week and 50% said that they use Workplace to find information or guides related to their job activity at least several times a week. 47% also responded that they search for opportunities to learn at least several times a week. However, when asked to describe what they have learned while using Workplace, 27% said that they had learned nothing.

This is less of a factor limiting informal learning, as it can take place without the learner being specifically aware, but it does impact employee’s ability to evaluate their learning activity, something which is asked of them as they complete their employee reviews.

4.5.5 A tool for non-formal learning: captive communities

Workplace also seems to be used as a method of non-formal learning, through the use of Workplace’s feed as a captive community. This is to say, that leadership, administrators and certain members of the corporate communication teams have access to post information that will be pushed to the top of the newsfeed for every employee. This generates attention through likes, shares and comments, which drives further attention to those posts. 50% of respondents reported using Workplace to keep up with company news. This was categorized this as non-formal learning because the company itself is responsible for the creation and dissemination of this information, at specific times.

Additionally, Workplace groups were also used during learning conferences as a way to communicate on conference activity and allow a large number of people to interact in real-time with speakers.

5. Discussion and perspectives

Using Siemens’ principles of connectivism (2005), we can begin to better understand some
of the tensions between leadership’s expectations and the actual usage, allowing for some potential solutions to be developed:

“1. Learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions.”

Workplace represents a space where opinions can be shared, but discussions and sharing of opinions are not necessarily occurring. Psychological safety may be playing a key limiting factor to participation in open conversations. As such, employees are using private chats more frequently than comments, or when there are comments they are not typically profound.

“2. Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources. Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is also a core skill.”

Currently in Workplace, hashtags are one of the only ways to connect those information sources. This disparate usage of hashtags makes linking and finding information, an integral part of networked learning, difficult. As such, while it can be argued that there is knowledge contained within Workplace, but accessing it is cumbersome.

“3. Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning.”

There is evidence that communities which are animated by one of the group members or an administrator are more active than those that do not. However, few groups have such an investment, likely due to the cost related to dedicating an individual to the task.

The implementation of a company social network offers many opportunities for informal collective learning. For businesses that aim to become learning organizations, it’s a step that is being taken more and more often. As such, more corporate universities will be asking themselves how they can use these systems to encourage learning.

Informal collective learning is happening mostly in communities of practice and communities of interest, via sharing and boundary crossing activities. Currently at Danone, participation in these groups varies widely, the learning that is happening is often unnoticed, the reputation of social networks leaves much to be desired and as discussed above, there are numerous gaps in usage. This gives Danone Academy a space in which to act, but will require investments of time, money and resources above the initial purchase of the platform itself.

There are a few steps that the corporate university may consider to make the most of what Workplace can offer, such as: investing resources in the development of communities of practice and implementing them into the company’s learning strategy; encouraging participation in communities of interest in order to help develop employees the skills and confidence to participate in professional groups; and finally putting in place a curation strategy in order to make content more accessible.

Moving forward, there is more research to be done in a number of directions. For example, the usefulness of Workplace or other social networks for co-located teams. There is not much evidence in this current study that teams are using Workplace much. It is also pertinent to examine the psychological impacts on employees who participate in these
communities at work. A good deal of research has been done regarding the effects of Facebook on young people, but very little has been done regarding the impact of social networks on adults in the context of the workplace.

6. References


