Understanding the Benefits of Social Networking within the Workplace

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INTRODUCTION

Research thus far on social network sites has been focused on four main aspects: privacy issues [1, 13], self presentation [5, 12, 18], network analysis [14], and social capital benefits [9, 16]. As Boyd and Ellison summarize [3]: "Although exceptions exist, the available research suggests that most social network sites primarily support pre-existing social relations."

The emergence of specialized social network sites targeted towards specific user groups, such as professionals [19], indicates that social networking can provide value to many types of users, and potentially different types of value. The focus of our research is on understanding how and why *professionals* inside of a company use an internal social networking site, and the benefits of their use. Given the popularity of social networking sites on the Internet for connecting, meeting and sharing [3], it is expected that employees will use a company-sponsored tool; little is known how they will use it or what value they will derive from it.

BEEHIVE: SOCIAL NETWORKING IN THE WORKPLACE

To understand how employees use internal social networking tools, we built a social network site behind IBM's firewall called Beehive (screenshot in Figure 1). As with other social network sites, it supports the "friending" of other people, provides an individual profile page for each user, and incorporates content sharing in the form of photo and list sharing [10]. While we built the site to support sharing between colleagues, we did not build in limitations on the types of content that could be shared, for example whether or not the content was personal or professional in nature.

MOTIVATIONS FOR USING BEEHIVE

Shortly after launching Beehive we conducted a usage analysis of the first several hundred early adopters and found evidence of relationship building and 'people sensemaking' throughout the site [4]. Employees were using the site to get to know their known colleagues better, particularly on a personal level, and to gain an understanding of who someone new is, performing what we term people sensemaking [6].

While this early analysis gave an indication of how people use Beehive, the analysis left a significant question unanswered: *why* are people using the site? What are their goals? To answer this question, we conducted in-depth interviews to understand users' motivations and thoughts on their usage. We followed-up the qualitative analysis with a quantitative overview of the site to determine if patterns observed in interviews were replicated more broadly [7].
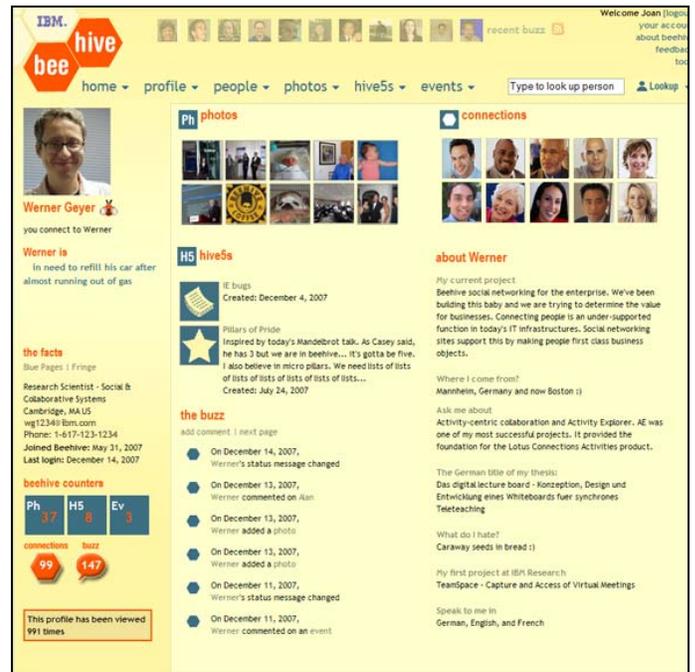

Figure 1. A Beehive profile.

This analysis revealed that patterns of use and user motivations differ from users of other social software tools. First, within the protected, closed off environment of the intranet, employees choose to reach out on Beehive to new people rather than only connecting to those they know, which is different than behavior found on Facebook [17]. Employees also share details of their personal life on Beehive which has not been found with any significant frequency in other enterprise social software tools, such as intranet social bookmarking and blogging [15].

By summarizing interview transcripts and considering users' value and benefit statements, three main themes of

user motivations emerged. Beyond the desire to share with colleagues on a personal level, which we anticipated would be a primary value for most Beehive users, we identified two additional motivations: career advancement and the ability to convince others to support ideas and projects. Employees use Beehive to present themselves professionally and to network with those they believe can assist them in their career goals within IBM. And those looking to promote a project or idea use the site's features to advertise and gather support from other users for their plans.

INCREASED SOCIAL CAPITAL

In related research, Ellison et al. found correlations between greater "bridging" and "bonding" social capital with greater usage of Facebook on a college campus [9], meaning that the ties to one's immediate and extended friends are stronger with greater use of Facebook. In our latest research, we conducted a similar analysis of Beehive users to determine if employees also experience greater social capital with greater use of the site [2].

We found that even with limited use of Beehive, over a relatively short amount of time, there are associations between types of usage and these different types of social capital. When someone is using Beehive for meeting new contacts, they report a greater interest in making these types of contacts at the company in general. When someone is using Beehive for keeping up with known colleagues, both in their workgroup and in their extended network of loose ties, they report having closer ties with their immediate network (bonding social capital), a higher sense of citizenship (willingness to help the greater good of the company), and greater access to both new people and expertise within the company. And finally, the more intensely someone uses Beehive (meaning more frequent visits and stronger associations with the community on the site) the higher they report their social capital is, across all measures. They have closer bonds to their network, they have a greater willingness to contribute to the company, they have a greater interest in connecting globally, have greater access to new people, and a greater ability to access expertise.

In this preliminarily analysis we cannot claim a causal relation between the use of Beehive and these social capital measures, but we see these results indicative of a relationship between use and these measurements.

UP-TO-DATE, RICH EMPLOYEE PROFILES

As do many technology-driven enterprises, IBM offers different mechanisms for searching for and finding information about employees. These services present standardized directory listings for individuals but provide relatively little timely or personal information about someone. While indexing and discovery tools are improving, it remains an enormous challenge for a company to *motivate* employees to update their information

in the company directory so that it is *up-to-date, accurate and complete.* Having rich employee profile information is a business-critical need for many companies and to support this need, Beehive includes different mechanisms to encourage and support users in providing rich profile details.

Traditional social network sites allow users to enter responses to a set of predefined fields when populating their personal profiles. In Beehive, free-form 'About You' entries allow users to craft their own questions / topics [8]. This freedom to describe oneself resulted in thousands of distinct 'About you' questions and answers on employee profiles. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to capture all of these rich and unique questions using any predefined set. One of the biggest strengths of this free-form approach is that it supports an evolving set of questions, making the system robust to new trends, such as the appearance of a "Second life?" question. Figure 2 shows a detail of an About You section, with real entries taken from multiple users and a fictitious owner.
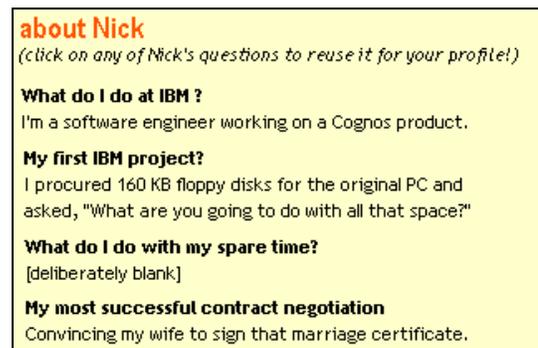

Figure 2. Example 'About You' section on a user profile.

While free-form self descriptions afford creativity, they do not provide guidance to users on how to describe themselves. Therefore we provide additional mechanisms that assist users in creating more questions and answers. Beehive initially included two such features: a static set of example questions and an explicit reuse feature. Those entries account for a large proportion of the entries in the system, supporting the need for exemplars.

A recent addition to Beehive was to provide personalized recommendations for 'About You' entries based on the user's network and profile content [11]. In our experiment with 2,000 Beehive, we found that users who received recommendations created more entries and updated them more frequently. Further, using articulated social network information for recommendations performed better than content-based matching.

In this line of research on free-form and personalized recommendations for profile information, we have made important strides towards supporting the corporate goal of having rich profile information available for each employee within the corporate directory.

CONCLUSION

As more employees use social software, both inside and outside of the company, to exchange and share with their colleagues, friends and family, there is an increasing need to understand how the use of these sites changes relationships, enhances our understandings of one another, and alters the workplace social dynamic. This workshop position paper is an overview of our initial evidence that a social network site inside the enterprise can play an important role in helping employees maintain and develop connections within the company, support networking and career goals, and potentially increase employee social capital. It also describes our research on how social software can support corporate goals such as having easily assessable employee profile information on the intranet. These results lay the groundwork for determining the value of social network site features within the organization.

At this workshop and through our continued research we hope to focus on these questions:

− Which design features of social network sites support the maintenance of relationships?

− What types of social software best support organizational goals of innovation, group formation, and expertise location?

− Does the use of social software in the workplace change the nature of relationships in the workplace?

− A potential drawback of the use of social media in the workplace is that employees will accomplish less work because of time spent using social software. Is there evidence of this and how can this cost be understood within the context of overall workplace productivity?

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