

Influence of Social Media on Employee Communications: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract - In today's knowledge-driven economy, employees have become the key source of competitive advantage for the companies. As a result, companies are compelled to think about ways and means of ensuring the happiness, well-being and satisfaction levels of their employees, in the hope of reaping benefits accruing out of enhancement in employees' motivation levels, skill sets and performance standards. Scores of studies have shown that effective communication between the management and the employees as well as among the employees themselves is one of the key drivers of employee empowerment, loyalty towards the organisation and qualitative and quantitative improvements in productivity. Social media, due to its collaborative, community building and interactive capabilities, is emerging as a key differentiator in this regard and a number of companies have already incorporated social media into their internal communication processes or are in the processes of doing so. This study, which is part of an extensive research to evaluate the impact of social media activities on organisation communication in over 100 high-performing companies across the globe, explores the effect of social media on internal communications and analyses the tangible and measurable improvements that the medium is bringing about, both for the organisations and for the employees.

Keywords – social media, employee, communication.

I. INTRODUCTION

Employee communications refers to the exchange of ideas, information, and feedback between the management and employees and among the employees themselves in order to boost trust, collaboration, motivation and innovation within the organisation, resulting in attainment of desired business objectives. Although the concept of employee communications has been around since the heydays of Industrial Revolution, it came to the forefront only in the last quarter of the twentieth century, when the balance of the economy shifted away from manufacturing towards service industries, and employees emerged as the key source of competitive advantage. During the early twenty-first century, as the advancements in the electronics and telecommunications further empowered the employees and organisations realised the importance of keeping the workforce happy and satisfied, employee communications turned from a "nice to have" to "must have" and came to be recognised as a vital component of the business strategy. Also, with a number of studies showing that the sedentary nature of modern-day office work and the increasing number of hours that people were spending at the workplace was contributing to a lot of stress in the employees and was leading to a detrimental effect on their health, communication within the organisations, cutting across all sorts of barriers, was perceived as one of the ways of infusing a sense of well-being in the employees.

On the face of it, people work for others because they need money to sustain themselves, but the reality is far more complex. People identify themselves with the work that they do and almost every aspect of their life is impacted by the jobs that they do. In his book *Positive Management: Increasing Employee Productivity*, Jack Walters reflects that states that "The ability of organisations to affect the level of happiness in people's work is more powerful than most believe, and the opportunities to do it occur far more frequently than most imagine" (2010, p.14). Walters' observations are supported by a survey of 200,000 employees from 189 countries, which indicates that the number one factor for employee happiness on the job is "being appreciated for their work". Other top factors include "Good relationships with colleagues" and "Good relationships with superiors", followed by "Opportunities to learn and grow". "An attractive salary" comes only at number 8 (Strack, Linden, Booker, and Strohmayer, 2014).

In his book *Strategic Internal Communications: How to Build Employee Engagement and Performance*, Cowan explores the interconnect between employee communications and employee behaviour, and notes that employee communications is not just about communications as traditionally understood, and it is more about "getting employees into a trade-off between their participation in the success of the organisational mission and what makes them content with their work/life balance". Cowan states that many employees do not see the

organisation as a place of advancement or even satisfaction. They see it simply as a place where they get paid to finance their home and other things that make them happy away from work (2014, p.17-20). According to Torvatn, Sorensen, Talja, and Eriksen, “management and HR practices that focus on worker involvement, autonomy, and cooperation will have positive productivity outcomes related to one of the following: better quality, more innovation, higher knowledge sharing, lower attrition, and lower absenteeism (Torvatn, Sorensen, Talja, and Eriksen, 2015, p.136).

In view of the changing realities, organisations that want to attract talent need to recalibrate their recruiting, rewarding, developing, retaining, and motivating strategies. While there can be a number of approaches that a company can adopt to meet this challenge, use of social media is likely to be a common thread running through each of the approaches. The McKinsey Global Institute found that “by fully implementing social technologies, companies have an opportunity to raise the productivity of interaction workers—high-skill knowledge workers, including managers and professionals—by 20 to 25%” (Chui et al., 2012). In their book *The Social Employee: How Great Companies Make Social Media Work*, Mark and Cheryl Burgess emphasise that the new workforce wants to work for a social business and the business that want to hire and retain the best young talent need to demonstrate that they are a social business, not just externally, but also internally. According to the authors, “The social employee can offer a window into a brand’s soul, driving a brand’s reputation to new heights through rich engagement and authentic representation” (2013, p. 4-12).

Our research indicates that the businesses are using social media for internal communication in the following ways:

Boosting Employee Engagement

The Gallup organisation has described employee engagement as employees’ involvement in, commitment to, and satisfaction with the work that they are supposed to do. Employee engagement is an attitude that makes employees believe that they are personally responsible for the success of their employer. Engaged employees support the innovation, growth and revenue that their companies need. Companies with highly engaged workforces outperform their peers by 147% in earnings per share and realise 41% fewer quality issues, 48% fewer accidents, 65% less attrition, and 37% less absenteeism (Mann and McCarville, 2016). Companies that are using social media applications for employee engagement are witnessing positive results, as is evident from the following two case studies from the airline industry, involving the use of Yammer.

Case Study: KLM Royal Dutch Airlines

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines uses a social media tool called Yammer for internal communication to achieve its goal of

becoming the most customer-centric, innovative and efficient European network carrier. Yammer has provided thousands of KLM employees spread across the globe with an engagement platform, and they are using it not only to share ideas and information internally, but also to communicate effectively with customers. On each KLM flight across the globe, the crew uses Yammer on their mobile devices to provide seamless, real-time feedback to back office staff or to report challenges and obtain solutions and suggestions. In a particular instance, when there was a shortage of drink items on certain flights, a cabin crew member notified the issue on Yammer and the error was resolved very quickly. Similarly, when wrong Inflight Sales magazine were loaded on European flights, the crew posted the issue on Yammer and the issue was resolved within a day. In another case, when a crew member figured out a better way to fold and recycle sandwich boxes and posted the idea to Yammer, along with the images, management quickly adopted the suggestion as a new company procedure. According to Simone Louwers, Director of Communications for Inflight Services at KLM, use of Yammer has led to significant improvements in communication between the teams, faster decision making, and improvements in customer service and business processes. “Staff enjoy that they can actually see who they are talking to, instead of supplying feedback via an anonymous email address... This type of direct communication through Yammer empowers and engages our cabin crew, who share innovative ideas with colleagues to raise the overall level of on-the-job knowledge” (Louwers, 2016).

Case Study: British Airways

British Airways too is using Yammer to encourage engagement and teamwork across its 41,000-strong workforce. Millions of social conversations that have taken place between British Airways employees spread around the globe indicate the vast amount of ideas and information that have been shared, raising the levels of on-the-job knowledge and improvements in processes and efficiencies. According to Adrian Steel, company’s Global Head of IT Operations, “We’ve found that Yammer facilitates spontaneous conversations among employees—sparking innovative ideas that help us operate more efficiently and improve customer service”. Steel also noticed that the use of Yammer goes up significantly at the time of significant events. For example, soon after the unveiling of new Airbus A380, some cabin crew members noted that the pantry layout could be improved, and one employee even created a sketch and posted it on Yammer. The organisation’s engineering team tracked this conversation and captured and incorporated feedback within a matter of days. In another case, the team responsible for customer experience started a thread about the amenity kits that British Airways gives out to customers, discussing what customers thought about them and what products might prove useful for the

customers, resulting in improvements to the kits (Dudley, 2016).

Improving Employee Collaboration

Jacob Morgan, the author of *The Collaborative Organisation*, says that collaboration creates a supportive work environment for employees by reducing stress, providing them more freedom that makes their jobs easier, making them feel more connected to their jobs and co-workers. All this translates into reduced stress at home, fewer arguments with spouses, and more time to spend with loved ones, which means that collaboration not only positively impacts the lives of employees at work but also at home (2016, p. 4-18). Social media allows employees across the organisation to collaborate in real time, making conversations that previously used to happen over email to direct talks and group conversations in no time, something that would have taken significantly longer to achieve previously. Using social media, employees are forming small and nimble groups across the functions—marketing, product design, and IT—to discuss problems, resolve issues, and find innovative solutions. This enhances productivity and customer service and also helps in change management, process redesign, and retooling.

Instead of spending hours each day trying to solve work-related issues in isolation, employees are using social media collaboration tools to interact with their colleagues, friends, and others in their network to find solutions. Nokia, for example, uses a social media tool called “BlogHub” that allows employees to create their own blogs that they can use to share their ideas and experiences, report challenges, and receive suggestions and feedback from people across the organisation (Varney, 2014). Businesses are realising that using social media platforms elicit a faster response from the employees, compared to traditional emails, thus boosting collaboration as well as productivity, cutting across geographical barriers.

Case Study: Wells Fargo

Wells Fargo, one of the world’s largest multinational banking and financial services holding companies, uses social media tools such as Jive and Salesforce Chatter for instant, multi-site, multi-employee collaboration. Following a corporate merger a few years ago, the company introduced the use of social media as a community-based method to integrate employees across teams and functions. According to Wells Fargo’s VP of Internal Collaboration, Kelli Carlson-Jagersma, the use of social media was not intended to be a replacement for the employee intranet and email. Instead, it was meant to be a tool that will turn passive employee participation into active collaboration and involvement and that will encourage employees to invest their time and effort towards strengthening their relationship with the company and with one another. Within a year of its rollout, the social media program became the

primary means to ask questions and obtain information about best practices for mentoring, servicing customer inquiries, and other areas. As a result of the program, employees were able to converse with unknown colleagues dispersed over a number of sites in a way that they won’t be able to do otherwise, creating a more positive and collaborative work environment (Laughren, 2015).

Showcasing Rewards & Recognition

As per Maslow’s Needs Hierarchy, while salary and perks meet an individual’s fundamental needs, being recognised satisfies an individual’s higher level psychological needs (Maslow, 1943). Research indicates that companies with employee recognition programs are more effective at improving employee engagement, and have 31% lower attrition rates and 14% better productivity and customer service than companies that do not have such programs. Research also shows that transparency, ease of usage, and ability to provide specific feedback are the most important aspects of a recognition program. Taking these factors into account, many companies are now leveraging social technologies that enable employees to give and receive positive feedback across the network (Garr, 2012). Being recognised socially not only makes the recipient feel great, but it also motivates and inspires others in the organisation.

Case Study: Virgin Media

Virgin Media, a leading provider of broadband, digital TV, and mobile services in the UK, has evolved its recognition program, Shout, from a paper-based scheme to a social media-based model, and has received several awards for its innovative use of social media to recognise its 18,000 employees. The program involves the creation of Facebook-style profiles on the company intranet, where employees can post “Shouts” on each other’s pages, along with general notes of appreciation or specific thank-you messages for a job well done. These can then be downloaded for use in career appraisals. It addresses some of the challenges presented by more traditional systems. By taking the process out of the hands of managers, it brings workers together and empowers them. On the one hand, it reduces the likelihood of managers patronising a select few, and on the other, it encourages managers to acknowledge Shouts in team meetings. Emily Scammell, Engagement and Employee Insight Manager at Virgin Media, says: “Bringing the program in to be part of each employee’s profile makes it a more sociable process. Employees may not be looking for someone’s Shouts, but they will see how they have been recognised” (Paterson, 2012).

Case Study: Hershey’s

Hershey’s, a global confectionery and snacking leader and the largest chocolate manufacturer in North America, runs a social recognition program called SMILEs that enables peer-to-peer recognition anytime, anywhere. The company’s 22,000 employees spread across 17 countries

can give non-cash rewards to each other whenever someone demonstrates a company value or achieves a corporate objective. The company launched the program to boost employee engagement, improve company's work culture and create a consistent rewards and recognition approach. The success of the program can be gauged from the fact that over 14,000 recognitions occurred during the first three months of the program, with 40 percent of the employees actively participating in the exercise. "The SMILES program embodies everything that Hershey stands for," said Kevin Walling, chief human resource officer at The Hershey Company. "The smile is a universally known symbol that is meaningful across all cultures and is closely connected to Hershey's goals and vision. When our employees smile, we smile" (BusinessWire, 2015).

II. PROMOTING EMPLOYEE LEARNING

Bandura's social learning theory posits that people learn through observations and peer-to-peer interactions, and this mode of learning is more efficient than formal learning methods (1977, p. 22). Many organisations, such as AT&T and Qualcomm are switching to social learning, in keeping with the expectations of an increasingly young workforce that wants to learn in an informal setup. Referring to use of social software for employee learning, Lambropoulos says that using peer-generated content for just-in-time learning, such as in preparation for a real task in the workplace, makes the learning personally meaningful to the learner. The learners can capture images, record videos, or do a screen share with the instructor and receive *in situ* correction and feedback, which is a definite improvement over pre-packaged learning content and pre-designed syllabi that often leads to boredom and confusion (2009, p.11).

When it comes to collaborative learning, the opportunities that social media offers are virtually limitless. Companies are using Google Hangouts to deliver lectures, Pinterest to share infographics, YouTube to share educational videos and SlideShare to view presentations. Businesses are using blogs to explain processes and guidelines, Facebook to convey new developments, Twitter to circulate short notes, and Yammer to create Q&A threads. Lastly, wikis are being used to build a knowledge base, and Chatter is being used to boost collective thinking. Apart from these publicly available platforms, there are a number of enterprise-level tools and apps that are increasingly being used by organisations to facilitate social learning. Employees can use these tools to access learning content that the company has created, as well as content that is available on sites such as Udacity and Coursera. Employees are being recognised and rewarded for completing courses. They can review the courses that are available and recommend them to others, and can even contribute to the development of new courses or towards updating the existing ones.

Supporting Employee Advocacy Programs

According to Erickson, Hamilton, Jones, and Ditomassi, "Empowerment is thought to occur when an organisation sincerely engages people and progressively responds to this engagement with mutual interest and intention to promote growth" (2003, p.96). Showcasing employees on company's social media pages and talking about their achievements can not only make the employees feel motivated, but also reflects the company in a positive light by making it look human, considerate, and sincere. Realising this, companies such as Verizon, Salesforce, Amtrak, Marriott, General Motors, and Starbucks are using social media sites such as Instagram to share employee pictures, highlighting the kind of work they are doing, and snippets from their personal lives. These companies are also using social media to showcase company events, fairs and get-togethers, and volunteering activities, while keeping employees at the forefront.

Employee advocacy programs, which encourage employees to share business-related content through their personal social media accounts, are not only beneficial for the enterprise, but also serve a positive purpose for the employees. Almost 86% of advocates in an employee advocacy program said that being involved in social media made them feel empowered in their careers. Two of the most common benefits reported by the employees included an expansion of their professional network and increase in their awareness about the industry trends and developments. Other benefits included the ability to develop skills that are in high demand, an opportunity to differentiate themselves from their peers and being recognised as thought leaders. From the organisational perspective, over 60% of firms that had employee advocacy programs credited them with attracting and developing new business, and nearly 50% traced back new revenue streams to employee advocacy. It's not surprising that leading companies such as Adobe, Kronos and Hitachi are making efforts to turn their employees into unofficial brand ambassadors (Frederiken, 2015).

Case Study: Sodexho

The management at global facilities company, Sodexo, recently took some positive steps to harness social media for employee branding. The company hired a professional photographer to take profile pictures of staff for use on their social networks. Following that, Sodexo's design team inserted the company logo into each of the images. As a result, employees received a professionally-clicked photo, while Sodexo gained from the interest and attention that the campaign generated on social media. "We encourage our team not only to be brand ambassadors for our company, but to build their personal brand as well," says Arie Ball, Vice-President of Sourcing and Talent Acquisition at Monster. "This helps create authentic relationships and ultimately strengthens the credibility of the company brand." Ball says the photo promotion has been successful

in part because Sodexo lays a lot of emphasis on developing and maintaining a company culture where employees are proud to associate themselves with the organisation. “It’s truly a win-win,” she says (Bennington, 2016.).

Proliferation of Enterprise Social Networks

In view of the effectiveness of social media as an internal communication tool, many companies have started using specialised enterprise social media tools, such as Facebook for Work, Google for Work, Yammer, Slack, Trello, Workfront, and Oracle Social Network Cloud are witnessing encouraging results. The advantage with using enterprise social media platforms is that the companies are able to share important messages in a casual and creative manner, thus increasing the chances of the message being noticed by a larger percentage of employees, vis-à-vis traditional internal communication tools, including emails and intranet portals. Because of the participatory nature of these platforms, employees find it less inhibiting to engage in the discussions, perhaps prompted by the fact that a colleague has commented on it or there’s an ongoing debate involving a number of co-workers. By creating a single channel for sharing of text messages, voice and video calls, PDFs, videos, images, and other documents, and by enabling integration of various applications and tools, enterprise social media platforms is also enabling the large companies to prevent proliferation of communication channels across business functions and geographies.

Case Study: Royal Bank of Scotland

Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS), which is one of the largest banking and financial services companies with over 70,000 employees and 30 million customers, decided to deploy Workplace by Facebook for enterprise collaboration and communication in 2015. The decision was borne out of management’s desire to improve company’s work culture by making it more transparent and participative. The fact that a majority of the company’s employees were already on Facebook and were familiar with its interface and features, also prompted the company to give Facebook for Work a try.

According to company’s chief administrative officer, Simon McNamara, a majority of the company’s employees started using the platform within weeks of its inception, generating thousands of comments and reactions across dozens of groups. The ones who were actively using the platform included not only the CEO Ross McEwen, who was posting about himself and what he was doing, but also those employees who were usually not keen to express themselves over the intranet or during open forums. By 2017, seeing employees’ response to the mobile-first platform, the company began considering eliminating emails and other communication tool, which it had found to be far less effective and way more costly to maintain.

McNamara also shared that the use of Facebook for Work has led to a positive effect on the bank’s bottom line by enabling employees across the geographies to work together on large projects and also to connect in real-time to resolve issues and bottlenecks. Use of the platform has also led to a spurt in employee participation in community activities of the bank (Wright, 2015).

III. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The workplaces are fast turning millennial, and conventional management practices that worked seamlessly till a decade ago, no longer work. The young workers of today are looking for a non-hierarchical, interactive, and collaborative work environment that allows them to stay virtually connected with their colleagues, learn from each other’s experiences, and share their knowledge, ideas, and experiences with everyone, including the customers. They are technologically far more proficient than some of their older colleagues and are naturally drawn towards social media, which they are using a lot in their personal lives and on which they can do almost everything that can be done in real life, be it communicating with friends and family, celebrating their life events, sharing their successes, drawing solace for their failures, providing their opinions, showing their creativity, forming communities of like-minded people, and so on. By proactively engaging the employees on social media, organisations are hoping to meet the employees’ psychological need for commitment and belonging and also make them understand organisation’s culture, processes, leadership styles, and business goals.

As part of our wide-ranging study to explore the impact of social media on organisational communication, we evaluated the social media activities of over 100 high-performing companies from around the globe between 2015 and 2018. Our research indicated that a majority of the businesses are extensively using social media for internal communication purposes, including boosting engagement with employees, improving collaboration at workplace, running rewards and recognition programs, carrying out learning and development activities, and promoting employee advocacy.

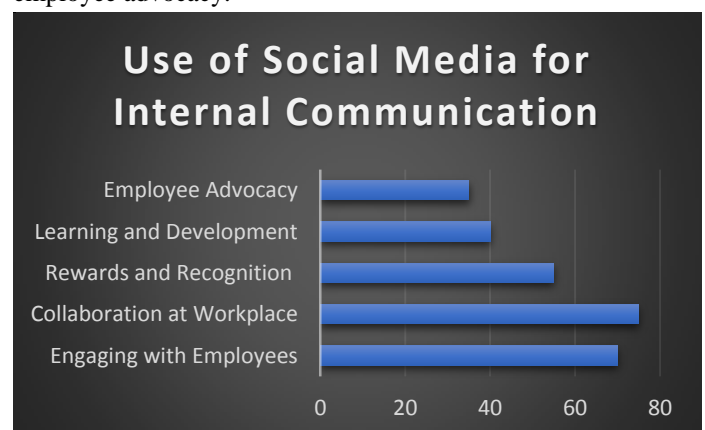


Figure 1: Use of Social Media for Internal Communication

Another key finding of our research was that over the period of three years, there was over 25% increase in deployment of social media for internal communication purposes. The biggest increase was seen in case of social media usage for employee advocacy efforts, followed by rewards and recognition programs.

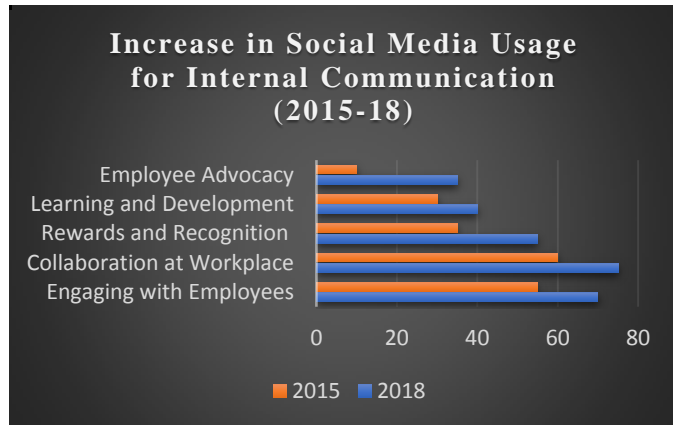


Figure 2: Increase in Social Media Usage for Internal Communications (2015-18)

In the long run, use of social media for internal communication is resulting in creation of win-win situation for both organisations as well as employees. On one hand, use of social media tools is enabling the employees to express and articulate themselves outside of formal communication networks, engage with key stakeholders and customers in an informal manner, receive and provide feedback in an inobtrusive and non-restrive way, be part of employee groups spread across geographies, and nurture positive relationships within and outside the organisations. On the other hand, employers too are benefitting from social media usage among employees in terms of process improvements, production efficiencies, faster customer service, smarter troubleshooting, and greater innovation that socially connected employees can bring in.

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