Chapter 6
Social Computing:
Harnessing Enterprise Social Networking and the Relationship Economy

Chaka Chaka
Walter Sisulu University, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates instances of social computing and the affordances it offers enterprise social networking. Employing a thematic synthesis approach, it argues that social computing in the form of blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and virtual worlds serves as an ideal platform that enterprises can tap into for enterprise social networking purposes. In addition, the chapter explores the way in which social computing can help enterprises leverage the relationship economy inherent in enterprise social networking. Against this background, the chapter provides, first, an overview of social computing and enterprise social networking. Second, it characterises, using examples of real world applications obtained through thematic synthesis, how enterprises can exploit instances of social computing cited above to extract business benefits from them. Third, it outlines how enterprises can harness the relationship economy, Value 2.0 and Prosumerism 2.0 to enhance their brand image and boost their online presence. Fourth, it presents caveats regarding how terms such as enterprise social networking, wikinomics, collective intelligence, relationship economy, Prosumerism 2.0 and Value 2.0 may degenerate into mantras. Fifth and last, the chapter delineates future trends likely to characterise enterprise social computing.

INTRODUCTION

Social computing (SC) is making its mark in different spheres of life. For instance, it is an emerging trend in learning, social life, business and organisations. In fact, it is virally diffusing through and colonising almost every aspect of human interaction. Mostly, it facilitates communication, collaboration and socialisation and fosters online networks, friendships, and relationships among individuals and groups or communities, thereby harnessing their relational and social capital. These two forms of capital have to do, in this case, with values embedded

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in and accruing from online relationships and social networks individuals or groups have among themselves while utilising SC applications such as blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and virtual worlds. In relation to enterprises, in particular, SC is increasingly becoming part of the enterprise computing fabric, having outgrown its Cinderella status. So, the affordances and efficiencies SC can provide to enterprises are many and varied. In this regard, affordances are potential benefits - known or unknown - any SC application has that enable users to undertake tasks in their SC environments (see McLoughlin & Lee, 2008), while efficiencies are the value-adds or enhanced performances that SC applications offer users at any given time. These affordances and efficiencies range from the relationship economy, Value 2.0 to Prosumerism 2.0. The last three concepts here refer to the economy deriving from online relationships, business value emanating from SC, and *production* and *consumerism* mediated through SC, respectively.

Moreover, by its very nature, SC offers dynamic, ubiquitous, distributed, real-time, collaborative, many-to-many, value-based and personalised enterprise computing. All this holds the potential for competitive edge for enterprises leveraging SC applications. Instances of the latter are: blogs; wikis; social networking sites; and virtual worlds. Based on this, the chapter explores the manner in which enterprise social networking on the one hand, and the relationship economy, Value 2.0, and Prosumerism 2.0 on the other hand, can be harnessed within the context of SC. Most importantly, thematic analysis was used as a method to select relevant examples of real world applications of SC tools like blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and virtual worlds in the enterprise social networking domain. Thematic analysis is a method for analysing data in primary qualitative research studies with a view to identifying and developing themes. It is similar to meta-synthesis and meta-ethnography. The latter are approaches to synthesising research whose goal is to produce a new and integrative interpretation of findings. They entail bringing together findings, examining them, discovering the essential features, and synthesising them into a transformed whole (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

However, in this chapter thematic analysis is used in a very narrow sense to refer to identifying and analysing topical and descriptive themes related to online search engine and database search results (see Adesope & Nesbit, 2010) in respect of given key phrases relevant to this chapter. These key phrases were: enterprise social computing; enterprise social computing platforms; enterprise social computing applications; and enterprise social computing – best practices for blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and virtual worlds. That is, a desktop online search (see *Table 1*) of these key phrases was mounted through the following search engines and databases: Google; Google Scholar; Bing; Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC); and Business-Technology Solution (BTS) database. Two selection criteria informed the search: recency/currency and relevance of information. In the first instance, the search was confined to a four-year time span - 2005-2009; in the second instance, relevant information was given priority in the search hits or returns.

Furthermore, a literature search was undertaken by reviewing and selecting online articles providing instances of best practices of enterprise social networking from search returns. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were employed in selecting articles. For example, an article was considered when it focused on any of the four cited SC applications (e.g., blogs, wikis, social networking sites, or virtual worlds) and discussed any of the key phrases identified earlier on. In addition, an article was given preference when it reflected instances of the following networking practices: collective intelligence; crowd wisdom; collective knowledge; network effect/network economy; the long tail economics; collective power of simulation; relational or relationship capital; and social