

Chapter 6

Cultural Barriers to Organizational Social Media Adoption

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ABSTRACT

From telephones to fax machines to personal computers to email, most communication technology has been introduced with a business function in mind, prior to becoming a part of our social lives. However, social media is a technological anomaly; private individuals quickly adopted this technology as an extension of their personal life without any previous introduction to it through their workplace. Due to this reversal, many organizations are struggling to understand how this technology can benefit their mission, while many more worry that it will devastate productivity and security. Individuals who wield the power of expansive social media networks can significantly alter an organization's credibility and fiscal health. Organizations who harness the massive data warehouses behind these social media networks have the ability to significantly alter individual lives and society at large; for better or worse. With this backdrop, what cultural barriers are being raised against social media adoption and how can management re-align their understanding of social media to better utilize resources and take advantage of the opportunities this technology presents?

PAVING THE WAY TO SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE

Paul Otlet envisioned a mechanized system of shared knowledge back in the early twentieth century (Rayward, 1975). As a peace activist, he

believed strongly in the transformative nature of freely sharing all of the world's knowledge as a way of bringing understanding across the globe. Mr. Otlet had conceived of a system of hyperlinks, which not only bound information together but also expanded on the understanding of the information by providing context. Unfortunately, given the era, the mechanism he envisioned was purely analog.

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This proved too significant a technological barrier for the system he designed to become reality.

Not quite a century later, you arrive at the modern digital world. In 1993, Tim Berners-Lee devised a system of hyperlinked documents that connect back and forth to each other, forming what he called the World Wide Web. Paul Otlet's vision had not been fully achieved but an incredible milestone had. The final component was to add context to the hyperlinks so that the information could be turned into social knowledge.

As we move beyond the second decade of the World Wide Web (aka Web 2.0 or the Social Web) the realization of context through a combination of metadata and machine awareness is starting to bear fruit. Websites like Facebook are using metadata and network awareness to provide suggestions to users for new friends with whom they might want to connect. Grocery stores are tracking spending habits and linking them to manufacturer coupons using complex algorithms to deliver coupons custom tailored to driving individual spending on higher end products. Search engines like Google are combining traditional indexing structures with social media networking data transfers to add further context to searches.

The network of machines that makes up our inter-connected world are, themselves, learning to understand our interactions better through context. The coming decades of this digital world should prove extraordinary in the history of technology. However, moving to a world of freely shared, contextual information has far more than a mere technological challenge to overcome. A world such as this has a terrific cultural barrier to overcome as well. Paul Otlet's vision was not just to create social knowledge but to extend it so far as to bring world peace. His utopian vision meant he faced an enormity of cultural barriers; some of which are being echoed here and now.

This chapter's vision is much more humble; to scale the cultural changes down to the organization. Creating a culture shift at this point should,

in fact, have global ramifications. Will this shift bring about world peace? Maybe not, but surely it will change the way we understand our world.

Within most organizations, there lies a wealth of information locked away due to both technological and cultural constraints. For the purpose of this chapter, cultural constraints are those organizational habits, leadership and management styles, policies and procedures that significantly hinder adoption of social media usage.

Through example, the following cultural barriers to embracing social media will be clearly defined:

- The desire to maintain a separation of personal and professional life.
- The fear of exposing oneself or one's efforts to scrutiny.
- The concern that use of social media will reduce productivity.
- The fear of new technology and remaining relevant.
- The security risk inherent in sharing information socially.
- The legal reporting requirements faced by some individuals and organizations.
- The flattening of organizational hierarchy and what that means for management.
- The loss of control over subordinates or project scope.
- The loss of competitive advantage.
- The overall fear of a Big Brother organization or society.

These cultural barriers will be explained in detail along side of current technological concerns. Here we will find both an opportunity to remove the barrier as well as examples of how this is already being done or might be done. As a result of removing those barriers we will discover opportunities for developing useful social knowledge.

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