

Chapter 27

Social Networking Technologies as a Strategic Tool for the Development of Sustainable Production and Consumption: Applications to Foster the Agility Needed to Adapt Business Models in Response to the Challenges Posed by Climate Change

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ABSTRACT

Addressed in this conceptual contribution is the use of Social Networking Technologies in the context of support for development of sustainable business practices, specifically the use of these technologies in a radical way to create information flows within the business and from external bodies, that effectively call into question the purpose, values, products, technologies, et cetera of the enterprise. This radical application is needed as part of a process of developing agility. Agility will be required in the future when businesses need to make significant adaptations to the way that they operate. Such fundamental changes in operation will be driven by the complexities of the structural changes in the business environment directly linked with climate change and other problems (e.g. security of energy supplies). Some of the complexities of these structural changes are discussed, along with key issues relating to paradigms, the social shaping of technology, agility, and the proposed application.

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INTRODUCTION

Business applications of *Social Networking Technologies* have been hyped as (yet another) revolution that will fundamentally change the way business is undertaken, with enterprises being urged to embrace this new technology (Fraser & Dutta 2008). Reality may however, turn out to be more prosaic, with businesses using the technologies in very predictable ways, e.g. to advertise; to sell products and services; to engage with customers to harvest information for marketing purposes; to establish brand related communities; to share information among a network of personal contacts; etc. Although useful and valuable, such applications are hardly revolutionary. In fact it could be argued that what makes these *Social Networking Technologies* and applications of interest to enterprises is the fact that they are not revolutionary.

Social Networking Technologies are an example of what can be called (Kidd 2008a, 2009a) *Socially Engendered ICT* (Information and Communication Technologies). That is to say, they were largely developed away from the world of corporate ICT applications, for the benefit of ordinary people with a wide set of motivations (e.g. having fun, being happy, play, social contact and networking, creative activities, etc.). The utility of *Social Networking Technologies*, if indeed they have any utility, lies in emotional meaning. They could also be considered as Ludic Systems (Huizinga 1970), meaning that they are strongly linked to playfulness in a very wide sense, including activities such as learning, exploration, etc. The Ludic perspective does not just characterize people by thinking or achievements, but also by their *ludic* engagement with the world: their curiosity, their love of diversion, their explorations, inventions and wonder. Play is therefore not just perceived as mindless entertainment, but an essential way of engaging with and learning about the world and the people in it (see Gaver 2009, for an example).

Typically however the corporate world of ICT is focused on *Business Engendered ICT* (Kidd 2008a, 2009a). This means ICT that has a clear utility, which typically involves using ICT to do a task better, faster, or cheaper, or all three. For most businesses this is the only reason they will have any interest in deploying *Social Networking Technologies*. This reflects the prevailing mind set in business, where in reality innovation is mostly incremental. So, no matter how radical *Social Networking Technologies* may seem, and regardless of the rather impressive way that *Social Networking Technologies* have become established in society, business applications are always mostly going to lie within the bounds of *taken for granted assumptions*. To move beyond this approach is a major challenge, but one that must be addressed if the world of business is to make better use of *Social Networking Technologies*.

One way of tapping into the innovation potential of *Social Networking Technologies* is to develop more strategic applications that firmly link with the medium to longer term future of the business. Such applications would be directed towards senior strategic thinkers and planners within businesses. One such potential strategic application is related to sustainability in the face of challenges posed by climate change and other complex issues (e.g. those relating to diminishing natural resources).

One of the major problems related to climate change is that businesses tend to think in terms of what Pacala and Socolow (2004) term, business as usual, with the implication that only incremental changes are going to be necessary in order to respond to the challenges posed by climate change. Yet climate change objectives set at a political level are very demanding. For example, in 2007, the European Union Heads of Government reached agreement on energy and climate change objectives (BBC 2007), these being: a 20% increase in the use of renewable energy (wind, solar power, etc.); a 20% cut in energy consumption; and a 20% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions; all by the

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