

## Chapter 6

# Linguistic Aspects of Informal Learning in Corporate Online Social Networks

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses the role of corporate online social networks in the process of informal learning. The first part of these studies offers some introduction to the issue of online social networks used in the corporate setting. The second component of the investigation is dedicated to discussing the notion of informal learning in online social networks. To limit the scope of the research, in the subsequent sections the author concentrates on the linguistic aspect of spontaneous and unofficial education acquired online by corporate members. To discuss these issues in greater detail, the concepts of homophilous and heterophilous networks in corporate online learning will be presented and discussed.*

### INTRODUCTION

Modern times are very dynamic, with changes and flows (i.e., circulations of material and non-material entities) determining one's life course (Papastergiadis, 2000). The latter can be divided into capital flows, information flows, technology flows, and know-how flows (Coskun Samli,

2002) or, similarly, into flows of capital, flows of information, flows of technology, flows of organizational interaction, flows of images, sounds, and symbols (Castells, 2010). Another term used to describe the mobility of entities in the twenty first century is *the object in motion*, a concept that encompasses the portability of ideas, ideologies, people, goods, images, and messages as well as technologies and techniques (Appadurai, 2001).

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This chapter focuses specifically on technology, which is not only one of the flows, but also the factor responsible for creating, maintaining, and catalyzing other flows. Moreover, technology is responsible for limiting or lowering the weight of entities since it has enabled a virtual rather than physical transport of ideas, people, and goods (Ritzer, 2010a).

Narrowing this discussion to the role of Information Technology (IT) in the corporate environment, it is IT that influences the flows of workers, money, ideas, services and goods in terms of both quality and quantity. The Internet is “an electronic Klondike, a new gold rush for all sorts of companies” (Rosenoer, Amstrong, & Gates, 1999, p. 15), which offers many business opportunities for all types of corporations and firms. Among these opportunities is the possibility of engaging more workers in the process of product design and organizational change as well as providing effective information input into the company (DiMaggio, 2001). New information technologies offer this possibility of attracting and involving more employees in organizational processes, regardless of their geographical location. Moreover, the Web is an important space where identity, both professional and social, is created and maintained (e.g. Holt, 2004). Simultaneously, technology is one of the most important factors shaping organizational identity (Carr, 2004; Fernandez, 2004). Thus, the modern tools of online communication influence the way the organizational personae is shaped, sustained, and perceived.

It should be noted that the relationship between technology and organizations is symbiotic. Because the attitude toward technology reflects organizational culture (Jex, 2002), the choice of online communication tools available to those participating in corporate communication is a commentary on the values, opinions and artifacts that create the organization’s corporate identity. The selection of online communication methods also depends on the level of online communication: virtual social networks, online communities,

virtual teams and organization as well as computer-mediated communication (Panteli, 2009). Since the increasing popularity of social media is visible in private and professional spheres, the author aims to discuss the role of social networking in organizational life by showing how the companies operating in the Facebook Era (Shih, 2010) benefit from social networking in various corporate activities, including knowledge creation and distribution.

## **ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS**

In the past, the Internet was mainly used for one way communication (i.e., presentation of information), whereas nowadays it is a place of dialogue and interaction, with the user acting not only as the reader, but also as the author (Jung, 2010), and not only as the receiver, but also as the co-creator, or even the *prosumer* (Ritzer, 2010b), who produces and consumes simultaneously. This change in the position of individuals acting online is related to the possibility of many people interacting at the same time (Servon, 2002), simultaneously as passive recipients and active creators of online content. The possibility of active participation in the information superhighway has shifted many formerly face-to-face social activities into cyberspace and has catalyzed the proliferation of new social networks.

### **ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS: HISTORY AND BASIC CHARACTERISTICS**

The first Online Social Networks (OSNs) appeared in 1979 (Bhulyan, Josang, & Xu, 2010) and since that time such networks have been an important part of modern life. Online social networks have been defined as “a Web site that encourages members in its online community to share their interest, ideas, stories, photos, music,

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