CAIS Poster: Non-Profits and the Use of Social Technologies for Knowledge Management

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Abstract

This poster presents key outcomes and emerging findings from ongoing research examining the role of social technologies such as blogs, wikis, and social networks (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) for creating, sharing, gathering and managing knowledge in non-profit organisations (NPOs). Mixed methods research including qualitative interviews with 16 Canadian NPOs and a national online survey of NPOs have generated a number of key findings on the role of social media as KM tools in the not-for-profit sector. These findings help us understand the implications of global connectedness, as manifested in social media, on the KM practices of these organizations.

Résumé

1. Introduction

The value of Knowledge Management (KM) has long been established in For-Profit Organizations (e.g., Prusak 2001), but the non-profit organizational (NPO) sector has been studied only recently (Lemieux and Dalkir 2006; Huck et al. 2011). As people-driven, task-oriented groups typically serving shared public interests (Teegen et al. 2004), (NPOs must manage knowledge from numerous sources (e.g., staff, volunteers, donors, communities), often with small budgets and a limited pool of skilled workers (Liu 2012).

Social media represent the evolution of an emerging knowledge ecosystem (Hemsley and Mason 2013), offering new solutions to the KM challenges facing NPOs. KM research must extend across the boundaries that exist between for-profit and not-for-profit contexts, to explore the KM implications for various organizational environments. As social media extend beyond global boundaries, allowing NPO stakeholders (such as donors and volunteers) to engage across geographic locations, more research is needed to understand the implications of global connectedness on the KM practices of these organizations. This poster reports the current and emerging results of a multi-phase mixed methods project that explores the use of social media by NPOs for KM.

2. Literature Review

NPOs are knowledge intensive units (Renshaw and Krishnaswamy 2009) involved in "creating social value for the society" (Lettieri et al. 2004, 16); thus, all NPOs can benefit from tools and resources that facilitate KM (Lemieux and Dalkir 2006; Huck et al., 2011). The challenge is in accessing and using resources effectively. Hemsley and Mason (2013) argue that social media tools create a "dynamic, complex information

infrastructure" that enables "easier, faster and more widespread sharing of information" (138). These tools, rather than merely complementing existing KM models, are catalysts for a new knowledge ecosystem within which organizations must operate (159). This position is corroborated by earlier scholarship on the value of social media as low-cost, low-threshold KM tools (e.g., Schneckenberg 2009).

3. Research Design

Qualitative interviews were conducted in 2012-2013 with staff in 16 NPOs in Alberta, Canada. The sample included hospitals, health organizations, food banks, shelters, advocacy groups, legal education centres, and public libraries. A national online survey of Canadian NPOs registered with Canada's Charities Directorate is now underway, with more than 300 surveys analysed to date.

4. Key and Emerging Findings

Core findings from the full study will be presented in this poster. Key qualitative findings will be compiled from earlier publications (e.g., Forcier et al., 2013a; Given et al., 2013; Forcier et al., 2013b), and examined in the context of new (unpublished) data from the online survey. Examples of key themes are:

- An emergent categorization of inter-organizational alliances and collaborative knowledge sharing relationships among NPOs, uniquely defined in terms of directionality, formality, and the use of social media in managing knowledge flows;
- A classification of knowledge types that interact in a cycle of knowledge creation for NPOs: 1) procedural knowledge, 2) expert knowledge, 3) community-generated knowledge;
- The use of social media to "tell the organisation's story" to the community is an essential function of social media for NPOs, but can prove challenging to accomplish effectively and consistently;
- For public libraries, the value of social media for engaging users and managing organizational knowledge is increased in larger, multi-branch libraries serving urban populations, but may also prove a useful, low-cost supplement to traditional methods of communication with users in smaller rural community libraries;
- Facebook is the predominant social media platform among Canadian NPOs;
- A greater understanding of the perception of 'knowledge' and 'knowledge management' as critical concepts among professionals and managers is needed.

Data collection for the online survey will be completed in early 2014, in advance of the conference; the poster will provide an overview of the project focusing on a summary of findings from both phases of the study.

5. Conclusion

The current state of research effectively demonstrates how social media represent a fundamental development in the field of Knowledge Management. By contributing original research regarding the role of both social media and KM in the not-for-profit sector, our work has made valuable connections between, within and beyond these areas of study that can serve as the basis for future scholarship. This poster addresses the conference theme of connecting across boundaries by providing evidence of NPOs' KM practices, with a focus on social media. By exploring the current state of KM practices in

this technological environment, NPOs can enhance their reach and engage with stakeholders across global boundaries – a key imperative given the financial and staffing limitations that many of these organisations face.

Acknowledgments

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