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Plugged into work media: Impacts of work media on IT employees

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Communication Studies Capstone

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social and work media in the workplace and the implications for employees who choose to be offline. Three sub-departments within an IT department at a public university were observed and four employees were interviewed. The findings indicated that social media only played a role in marketing and public relations. Work media, including Google apps, IRC chat, IM through Pidgin, and over the phone were found to be the main modes of communication. The organizational structure, which had specialized departments, required the employees to communicate, whereas the centralized, fast-paced organizational culture required employees to collaborate. Due to individual preferences in communication media, employees had to tailor the medium they used to the preference of the desired contact. Analyzing the norms and social conventions for how these media were used, constant availability was found to be a company expectation. Being offline may simply not be an option for future employees working in professions that require communicating via technology.

Introduction and Rationale

In our ever increasing media saturated consumer society, there is a constant pull toward having an online social media presence that is deemed a necessity to be a functional member (Portwood-Stacer, 2012). According to a recent poll collected by a Pew Internet Project survey, 72% of Generation Y Internet users are on social networking sites, and many Generation X'ers and Baby Boomers are quickly following suit in order to remain "relevant" in the digital era (Leidner et al., 2010). Social media, otherwise known as Web 2.0, differs from all previous technological innovations, in that content is no longer published by more privileged parties, but rather is generated and continuously modified by users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This has resulted in the increase of personal information sharing and interaction between all internet users.

With the move toward more mobilized technology, social media never rests and people can be connected 24 hours a day. This continual access creates a blurring of boundaries between the private and work domains, where people are integrating their social and professional lives (Bucher et al., 2013). According to a survey done by global consulting firm McKinsey, 65% of companies reported using Web 2.0 technologies within their organizations (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Bucher and her colleagues (2013) argue that with the adoption of new information and communication technologies, many organizations must redefine their structures, business processes, and daily routines. The more present focus is often placed on how essential it is for companies to integrate social media into their organizations, while often overlooking the implications of employees who choose to not embrace social media.

This study focuses on how the integration of social media, as well as work media in the workplace has affected employee relations and how media use is negotiated between employees. First I will discuss the theoretical framework that may help to provide lenses through which to

interpret the findings. Next, all previous findings will be discussed in the area of enterprise social media (social media used within the workplace), which help develop the necessary research questions. Following, will be the methodology of this study, along with the results. The last section discusses the findings and implications of social media in the workplace.

Theoretical Framework

Within this segment, I will discuss the various theories that will ground this study. Social Construction theory is utilized to explain the ways in which users construct their reality when sharing information with others online. Critical theory examines the power play between the users of social media and abstainers and the ideologies created by social media usage. Cultural studies is used to examine how social media usage contributes to the power dynamics between users and non-users. This is followed by Dialectical Theory, which studies the contradictory tensions users experience when posting information online and the decisions users must make. Lastly, Organizational Culture examines the interactions between organizational members in order to discover the artifacts, values, and assumptions about technology and social media that are not explicitly stated. Combined, these theories provide insight into what kind of culture is created while reality is being constructed, and how power structures affect the construction of that reality, and in turn the organizational culture.

Social Construction Theory

Inherent with user generated content, is that everyone theoretically has the ability to both produce and use information, and communicate on a larger scale. According to Social Construction Theory, communication is the primary way humans make sense of the world and construct reality. It is through our interactions within social systems from which meanings arise and are continuously negotiated (Allen, 2005). With the presence of social media, this

negotiation of reality, which shapes our understanding, happens more frequently and on a more global stage. It is therefore important to understand how the absence of interaction within this domain contributes to the construction and negotiation of reality. Critical theory helps to explore how power is distributed in these interactions, and subsequently how reality is constructed based on the power bases of the participating and nonparticipating individuals.

Critical Theory

The social system in this study that is gaining increasing popularity and dominance is social media. Within Critical Theory, the main concentration is on how this social structure came to be the dominant system, the social relations within this system, and the practices of those within the system (Deetz, 2005). Essentially this theory studies the power dynamics in human relationships that create and perpetuate the system in place. The questions we ask are: how do humans produce cultural signs, how do humans use language, how do humans treat conflicts, and how does culture contribute to the system that has been created (Deetz, 2005). The information age has brought with it social media, which provides information instantly and constantly. It also allows access for people to voice their opinions and level the playing field between the common man and privileged individuals. Those who do not partake in social media then are perceived as consciously choosing to have less power because they have less access to information and a forum to voice their opinions.

Most critical work within Critical Theory focuses on critique of ideology; ideology within this context means the “implicit values directing thinking and action” that are generally so deep seated that they are unknown and undiscussed (Deetz, 2005, p. 95). The ideology overstated in the social media world is the inherent goodness of openness and connection. These implicit values affect our thinking and actions, reminding us that society values citizens who are

constantly “plugged in” with the rest of the community. This ideology leaves little room for people with different interests to express why they have not joined the masses, and labels them as holdouts from the “natural” process of going digital. This system lacks representation of the different interests of workers within an organization, which causes misunderstandings and misrecognition of their actual interests (Deetz, 2005). Cultural studies offers a deeper insight into how the power dynamics of the studied organization are perpetuated by focusing on how culture is established and maintained during daily interactions.

Cultural Studies

Within Cultural studies we examine the cultural practices of the organization and how they contribute toward the power dynamics under scrutiny (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). We specifically look at the social and political contexts in which the culture manifests itself in the way we construct our daily lives. We concentrate on how the medium or message affects ideology, social class, etc. and how meaning is generated through communication within a particular culture. The digital culture greatly affects the way people talk about their engagement or disengagement with social media. A subculture is definitely present including people who for some reason or another decide to not partake in the online social world. This dominant culture greatly affects our thinking about people within the subculture, and consequently how we behave in order to fit in. Dialectical theory gives insight into how people make decisions regarding their media usage and availability online.

Dialectical Theory

Even within the dominant culture, users must still make decisions about their usage, with often contradictory options. They must decide between how much information to share (what is too much or too little), how visible they wish to be to other users, and how engaged they must be

in their interactions with other users. Dialectical theory explains that meanings emerge from the “struggle of [these] different, often opposing discourses” (Galvin et al., 2012, p. 70). How users manage these contradictions give insight to the values of the organization. Organizational culture theory helps to explain what these values and emerging artifacts and assumptions tell the researcher about employees use or non-use of media.

Organizational Culture

Values, along with artifacts and assumptions that emerge from the interactions within an organization make up the organizational culture (Keyton, 2014). Artifacts within an organization include “norms, standards, customs, social conventions, logos, and mission statements” (Keyton, 2014, p. 550). Values are the “ideals or beliefs about what an organization should pursue, or how an organization and its members should behave” (Keyton, 2014, p. 550). Assumptions are “taken-for-granted or deeply entrenched beliefs that are difficult for organizational members to discuss explicitly” (Keyton, 2014, p. 550). This theory studies how discourse of these three aspects of culture and the culture itself affect one another; the common question within this theory is does culture affect discourse or does discourse affect culture. Depending on how users of social media talk about their usage, we can gain insight into the artifacts, values, and assumptions that make up the organizational culture, since they are not explicitly stated. Knowing the organizational culture may help to critique the unspoken rules in place about social media usage within the workplace.

Previous Findings

Already existing literature on social media abstention and enterprise social media in general highlights five major themes. The first two themes are using social media for information, including knowledge sharing and people sense making, (Brozowski, 2009; Burt,

1992; DiMicco et al, 2008; Gibbs et al., 2013; Leidner et al., 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013; Portwood-Stacer, 2012) and building a sense of community (Brozowski, 2009; DiMicco et al, 2008; Leidner et al., 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013). The third theme is use of metaphors to describe social media and the language used to describe use or non-use (Leidner et al., 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013; Portwood-Stacer, 2012). The fourth major theme was Social Capital Theory, meaning social media is used as a tool for resources (Brozowski, 2009; Burt, 1992; DiMicco et al, 2008; Leidner et al., 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013; Portwood-Stacer, 2012). Lastly, Dialectical Theory was discussed in terms of what factors were negotiated online (Gibbs et al., 2013; Leonardi et al., 2013).

Information sharing

Through qualitative interviews and observations of enterprise social media usage by employees of chosen companies, researchers found overlapping themes in how social media was described by users. By far the greatest benefit of social media which was cited was that social media gave people the opportunity to find information, share their knowledge, and access people. The most common terminology used was making connections to “weak ties” which are people whom you do not know (Brozowski, 2009; Burt, 1992; DiMicco et al, 2008; Leonardi et al., 2013). The resulting new connections allow people access to information that was previously unavailable, which provides new opportunities that others do not have (Burt, 1992). Burt (1992) argues that information does not spread evenly and there are limitations to how many places you can be in at one time. Social media is therefore necessary for being in dialogue with as many people as possible so that one does not miss out on an opportunity to gain information. The danger lies in information overload and being able to manage one’s attention.

People sense-making

Social media is also used as a social learning tool within an organization that helps employees make sense of the culture and the people, which in turn allows them to integrate more smoothly into the culture of the organization (Gibbs et al., 2013; Leidner et al., 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013). The question then becomes are people outside of social media less integrated into the culture of the organization. Information taps into the expertise people can offer toward those with whom they communicate and works as knowledge-sharing (Brozowski, 2009; Gibbs et al., 2013). Leonardi and Huysman (2013) state that enterprise social media provide visibility and persistence, which means that effort used to locate information is more accessible, regardless of when it was presented. More accessible information allows for more integration, which allows for more innovation and learning, and therefore, more company growth (Brozowski, 2009; Leonardi and Huysman, 2013). The control benefits, Burt argues (1992), are in the active distribution of information, where lack of motivation is the biggest cause of losing full potential of accessing relevant info. In other words, if you want connections to information, the best way to do this is to be active on social media.

On the other side of the spectrum is the assumption that effective communication is characterized by disclosure and general openness (Gibbs et al., 2013). According to Gibbs and his colleagues (2013), the benefits of openness depend on the individual relational and organization goals, and the environmental and situational characteristics of the workplace. The knowledge of others does not necessarily improve relationships, but may in fact increase awareness of differences. Ambiguity may promote unified diversity, whereas clarity may create more need for impression management because people provide more information about themselves (Gibbs et al., 2013). The need for collaboration completely dismisses the idea that

there are employees who purposefully choose to not share information that provides them with an advantage in the workplace. It is also possible that there are people who simply do not wish to connect with people and prefer face-to-face communication with a small number of people.

Building sense of community

Aside from information, social media users also cited building a sense of community as a major benefit of enterprise social media. One particular employee that was interviewed described using social media as a way to orient herself in the organization by understanding what other people do and how the organization works (Brozowski, 2009). Others stated that they got to see the “human side” of their company by discussing personal, non-work related topics and reading commentary about people’s lives outside of work (Brozowski, 2009; DiMicco et al, 2008; Leidner et al., 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013). For one particular company, the use of an internal social media site allowed for more employee engagement, which boosted morale and employee commitment to the company (Leidner et al., 2010). In many interviews from different studies, internal social media sites were regarded as excellent ways of making friends and making long-term connections with other employees that were both personal and professional (Brozowski, 2009; Leidner et al., 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013).

Although more connections may lead to more opportunities for collaboration and improved work processes, there could also be disadvantages with increased interaction amongst employees. Burt (1992) states that people are generally egocentric and develop relationships with like-minded people. This could create fragmentation within the workplace, where people highlight group membership and create social boundaries (Leonardi et al., 2013). Collaborating with like minded people may also pose dangers for groupthink, which would paradoxically hinder innovation through the use of social media (Leonardi et al., 2013).

Metaphors

An interesting trend that presented itself through the literature was the use of metaphors in describing social media, and also the language used to describe non-participants. In one study, the internal social media site the company was using was compared to a family (Leidner et al., 2010). The interaction provided by the site was like a support system, which was always there with someone ready to help if problems were encountered. People felt they could rely on the site for professional or personal support. In another study, enterprise social media was described as (1) leaky pipes, (2) an echo chamber, and (3) a social lubricant (Leonardi et al., 2013). The leaky pipes metaphor was indicating that the site was a great way to learn about someone, which would allow for that person to make small talk later with the information they learned. The echo chamber metaphor indicates that people find others with similar views. The social lubricant metaphor is that social media allows for smoother interaction because people do not have to ask direct questions to find out information about people.

In general, these metaphors shed positive light on enterprise social media without focusing on the possible negative effects of the same characteristics. Because people can find out information about others without direct interaction, this may encourage lurking behaviors where people engage in passive information seeking (Leonardi et al., 2013). I already discussed the dangers of finding like-minded people in an organization. Lastly, the social lubricant metaphor does not account for people who do not engage in social media. How do people with social media approach others who do not? Are people less inclined to meet people that do not have information readily available about them? Do we value novelty?

In one study specifically discussing why participants were abstaining from Facebook, the metaphors used by the subjects compared social media to junk food or reality TV (Portwood-

Stacer, 2012). In essence, Facebook was considered to be an insubstantial form of connecting, just as junk food is an insubstantial form of nourishment or reality TV is an insubstantial form of entertainment. The notable difference here is that users of social media generally provided positive metaphors, while non-users provided very negative metaphors. Clearly the dominant group supported their usage, while the counter group of non-users was disapproving.

Due to the dominant discourse of people on social media, the language used to justify people's abstention from Facebook was therefore directly working against the hegemony of the status quo and was a direct ideological critique (Portwood-Stacer, 2012). Whether or not the reasons the abstainers gave were explicit or implicit, users of social media generally dismissed them as superficial, self-righteous, and misguided (Portwood-Stacer, 2012). This creates a challenge for non-users of mainstream social media to adequately explain their non-interests to people who fundamentally do not understand why someone would abstain from an integral part of life in the digital age.

Social Capital Theory

Many of the studies also found that the Social Capital Theory kept reemerging as a theme. Social Capital Theory is the rate of return or expected profit a person receives from his or her relationships with other people in an organization (Burt, 1992). Brzozowski (2009) argues that the greatest asset of any organization is the people within it and if companies knew all the information they already had within the company, they would be profitable. Companies and employees within companies want the most amount of information because knowledge is power and provides a return on investment (Burt, 1992). Knowledge provides opportunities for job promotions, participation in significant projects, and allows for influential access to important decisions (Burt, 1992). In one study which quantified the reasons employees used enterprise

social media, the findings were that firstly the site was used for sharing personal info, and then for career advancement (DiMicco, 2008). Burt (1992) states that if people want the highest return on investment they must balance the diversity of their network by maximizing the number of non-redundant contacts and increase contacts vertically not horizontally.

Social media in essence is then a social resource and used for social capital benefits for people to get ahead (Leidner et al., 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013). The argument used against people who choose to abstain from Facebook is that people who already have enough social capital have the ability to “switch off” the digital grid (Portwood-Stacer, 2012). Viewing social media through the Social Capital Theory places humans as a means to an end. People are commodities to be used to get ahead and gain organizational visibility by management (Leidner et al., 2010). Social media is a tool for using people to climb the social ladder and not a means of creating meaningful relationships for people who have career advancement as a goal.

Dialectical Theory

Lastly, with social media there still exist many dialectical tensions. People still struggle with predictability versus novelty. Users must constantly decide if they are over-sharing information and how much information is appropriate for particular topics (this could also fall under sharing versus controlling). Users also struggle with openness versus closedness, visibility versus invisibility, and engagement versus disengagement. Is good communication necessarily open and visible? Subjects in one study stated that they must constantly negotiate how visible and engaging they are in their online collaborations with colleagues (Gibbs et al., 2013).

Preference for isolation was viewed as problematic by management. We must consider the role of social media and collaboration in the workplace and how the presence of social media will continue to impact organizations in the future.

Research Questions

If social media is increasingly used to connect employees and gain social capital, the non-user will increasingly be left out of these opportunities to move up in an organization. The power then lies with social media users who generally control the discourse of the organization, which helps solidify an organizational culture that highly values social media usage. Especially if social media is used for collaboration for work tasks, non-users may face challenges in connecting to their coworkers, which may hurt their work ethic. It may be helpful to look further into alternative methods of information sharing and community building that do not utilize social media and provide more inclusive means of communicating. Listening to workers dialogue about social media usage may help gauge the reality constructed around the role of social media in the professional sphere. With the previous findings in mind it would be helpful to look at:

R_{Q1} What role do social media have in collaboration in the workplace?

R_{Q2} How are non-users of social media perceived by others?

R_{Q3} What are the social and professional impacts of being “offline”?

Methodology

In trying to gain insight into the impacts of social media on the workplace, an IT department within a north western public university was observed. An IT department was chosen as a research setting because IT workers interact within their workplace, which provides great data on social construction through discourse, and they spend quite a bit of time online during working hours. They have ample opportunities to speak in person and communicate online, which can be observed simultaneously. This unique environment provides IT workers with a unique perspective on the usage of communication technology.

Subjects were observed quietly, unless there were questions needed to understand the context of the interactions. Not only were the physical interactions being observed, but the subjects' online activity was also monitored in order to know in which sites the subjects were interacting. Three different departments were observed in order to compare organizational culture across IT departments and any differing preferences for communicating. The observations were done through field notes, which produced "detailed knowledge about [the] chosen scenes of social life" that act as "textual artifacts" which created "the foundation on which [the] analytic claims are subsequently built" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 155).

After the observational period, four employees were interviewed, each from a different sector of the entire IT department. Three interviewees were the coordinators of their department, and the fourth interviewee was the director of the combined departments. The qualitative interviews included open-ended questions that were designed to "[understand] the social actor's experience and perspective through stories, accounts, and explanations" that would provide a window into the culture of the organization (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 173). All interviews were recorded and coded based on repeated themes found in the employee's personal accounts and narratives, along with the observational fieldnotes. The coding process included sorting all observational fieldnotes and commentary from the interviews into appropriate categories; these notes were subsequently color-coded based on the speaker or location of fieldnotes (e.g. help desk observations were coded red, commentary from the director were coded green). Names of employees and location have been removed, so as to ensure the confidentiality of the study subjects.

Results

An analysis was conducted to determine how integrated social media is in the workplace and how that affects relations between users and nonusers. The findings indicate that social media is not an integral part of the professional sphere, but is rather reserved for personal use. The data generated by the observational field notes and one-on-one interviews were grouped into three main themes, which help to explain why other communication technology media are preferred over social media. These three themes are organizational structure, organizational culture, and methods of communication. Each of these factors will be examined further in detail in this section.

Organizational Structure

Within this IT department, there is a clear structure and hierarchy, which is enforced through the process of workflow. Although employees state that the environment of the university is casual “For the most part” in that they do not utilize official titles and they “Try not to maintain a power status” by being “encouraged to contact others in the department for questions”, it becomes apparent that despite their descriptions, there is a bureaucratic structure that dictates where and how tasks are managed. At the “front end” of the organization is the help desk which “fields most of the calls” and when a ticket (equivalent to an order) is too complicated, it is escalated to the Desktop Support technicians (DST), then escalated to staff, who are managers of the departments, etc. The further up the problematic ticket is escalated, the more “specialized” the department. Many times a ticket is escalated simply due to a particular department not having permissions to access certain information or to execute certain actions. One employee described that he must “contact somebody” who has permissions and “it’s one specific person that can do this.” For example, Client Systems Administration (CSA) restricts

access to particular information from the Labs/Classrooms Team (LCT) for security reasons. Therefore, if an LCT needs access to necessary task sequences, he or she must contact the CSA. This rigid hierarchy makes “communicating using technology... a really core part of how we all work here” because employees need to communicate between departments in order to find contacts that have the necessary information or permissions. Employees recognize the “bureaucratic aspect” of the organization, which requires that “certain procedures [be] handled a certain way if [employees] want to talk to each other”, but most employees display indifference towards this organizational structure. They recognize the fact that each department is very specialized in each of its areas of expertise, which requires sub-departments to collaborate in order to accomplish every day tasks. Part of the job is “escalating the problems that are systemic to the right teams” in order to fix the problem as soon as possible, because each department has its strengths, but also lacks knowledge in certain areas as well.

Organizational Culture

Like any other organization, the particular IT department in this study has its own culture. Due to the nature of work with technology, which rapidly changes, employees must always “have [their] finger on the pulse” and keep themselves updated. The current project in the DST department is to replace every computer older than four years with new ones since they are less prone to viruses and breakdowns and require less overall maintenance. In the case that an employee needs to know how to fix a particular problem with a computer, many departments have created Google docs or Wikis, which have a step by step process of how to solve whichever problem. Editing these documents is highly encouraged as “most info becomes obsolete within 3-4 months.” To this statement a coordinator jokingly remarks, “That’s technology for you.” This rapidly changing culture requires employees to communicate with one another on updates

and newly learned information, meaning collaboration and information sharing is crucial. In fact, the User Support Services director spends majority of his time in meetings where they must “[assimilate] information”, and [distribute] that back down to [the] staff”. He described his average day as “being a conduit for groups” or a “liaison to departments”.

This organization is also highly “centralized” and “centrally managed”, which requires newcomers to learn mass amounts of information, including jargon. One coordinator described the first month as particularly “rough, because [newcomers] have to memorize and abide by standards and they’re corrected slowly over time.” Basically, he states, “By watching people you learn how to act here.” These various standards create an information-seeking culture, where most conversation revolves around asking what to do or where to go. Typical questions include, “What’s the ID number on that?” or “Is there anything special I do?” or “Should I escalate it?” Conversations revolve around acquiring information, whether it’s in person, over the phone, over chat, or email.

The employees themselves refer to the organization as being “nerdy” and in many ways homogenous. One employee stated, “The types of people that are attracted to a lot of these jobs are also sort of the same kinds of people, so they share a lot of common interests. Like video games is a pretty hot topic in the back room as well as, like anime cartoons and stuff that nerds like....They tend to become fast friends.” The combination of similar personalities reinforces a nerdy culture since the average employee is a “home-grown nerd who built his own computer and knows how to do it all himself.” This particular university IT department resembles in many ways the stereotypical nerdy environment. Most if not all of the employees have some background in computers and many have made references to video games during the observation period. You don’t “really see female faces”, bright colors are not usually worn (generally black,

grey, brown, dark blue, or darker red), and most of the offices have minimal decor. As I walked around the offices and cubicles, I noticed each office maybe had a lamp or a poster, but otherwise had miscellaneous computer parts and papers lying around. In one employee's cubicle, there were extra keyboards stacked on the back desk, along with USB drives and connector cables. After comparing the various offices, I found this to be typical.

However, although employees share many similarities and interests, each department also has a culture of its own. As one employee described, the little teams within IT "have their philosophical differences because they're tied to their operating systems, which is sort of how nerds are." So although these employees all share a common interest in technology, they have their preferences to whichever operating system and specific programs. These preferences dictate how these departments prefer to deal with particular technological problems, which may produce tensions between differing viewpoints. Their differing work tasks also create jargon that is specific to a particular department, which further differentiates and divides employees by departments. One employee compared his department to another's saying, "I wouldn't have any idea what they're talking about and they wouldn't know what I'm talking about just because we're, I mean we're part of the IT department but we're doing two very different things." They are also using different systems and programs to accomplish their tasks. Another employee remarked to this fact stating, "That's the problem with technology, not everyone uses it the same way. You don't expect everyone to use it the way you do." Each department has its own preference for communication media, meaning employees must tailor the medium they use to reach others in the organization based on the preferences of the desired contacts. For example, one employee stated, "Don't call the Unix guys. They prefer IM. Help desk obviously you can call or talk to in person." So although the organization is very centralized and has a hierarchy,

there remains “30,000 ways to communicate.” The centralized culture requires that employees learn the rules of the organization in order for various departments to have common ground. The fast paced culture of technology requires that employees learn everything quickly. Although people with similar interests are attracted to working at an IT department which helps to solidify the centralized culture, employees still have their individual preferences, which forces employees to learn multiple modes of communication.

Methods of Communication

This brings us to the methods of communication. Within this organization, they utilize five primary methods to communicate within departments and between departments. These are through Google apps (including Gmail, calendar, Google docs, Google chat, Google hangout, and Google spreadsheets), IRC chat, IM through Pidgin, over the phone, and in person. Preference for any particular medium varies “team by team and individual by individual.” One employee says in order to choose which medium to use he “gages it by who [he] is trying to contact.” Employees are definitely expected and even trained on how to use all of the primary methods of communication, but are not expected to have a specific preference; so they naturally create their own. This requires employees to be flexible in their approaches and be able to utilize multiple methods whenever they need to reach someone else in the organization. The nature of work for particular departments also helps in creating preferences. For example, since help desk employees have answering phone calls as part of their job description, this may be a reasonable method for reaching this department, whereas LCTs communicate more through IRC because their work entails more collaboration with departments in other buildings. As one employee put it, “Depends on the medium you use, you’ll get different responses” because different employees have different preferences for how they would like to be contacted. Partially these preferences

are tied to making workflow more efficient and also to what the employee is most comfortable using. Social media, in the midst of all the communication technology, was described merely as a tool to market IT services and for personal networking.

Social Media

The findings indicate that social media plays a minimal role in the workplace for this particular organization. Whenever the subject of social media was addressed, employees only referenced it as a way to connect with employees outside of work and as a tool for connecting to customers. Employees did not use social media for any work-related tasks due to security reasons and instead used Google docs to share and edit information. One employee admitted that he was “tempted to check Facebook at work”, but that “work is not socialization time.” This would turn our attention to the role of communication technology in the workplace.

Google

Google is the primary domain, in which most communication in this organization happens. An employee automatically receives a Google account, which includes Gmail, calendar, Google docs, chat, and hangout. The Gmail account is automatically linked to certain mailing lists, which get sent out to employees within specific departments. An employee, who personally does not use his work email, has synched it to his private email, so that he is always aware of what is happening in the organization. Google is completely infiltrated into this organization, where the employees use the Google apps for merely every kind of task. One employee describes the organization as part of a “Google campus” and another employee stated that “most IT people are completely googlified.”

Email is the primary method of communication within this organization. The ticketing system is linked with email and most essential information is sent out through this medium. An

LCT employee said, “I think a lot of my time is just spent responding to emails.” While another employee complained that he didn’t know which projects to work on because another coordinator didn’t email everyone about some procedure he had changed earlier. As one employee nicely summarizes it, “Email is the vehicle by which most business communication occurs.”

Many of the other apps Google provides serve as collaboration tools. If an employee just needs a quick response, they may “use a lot of the Google talks feature through Gmail, since pretty much everybody has access to that and it’s usually just open on their computers.” When collaborating on big projects they utilize Google docs, where they can “edit in real time” and “chat with people inside the document.” These documents are also available to anyone the writer shares them with and is open to virtually anyone in the department. Google hangout, in particular, allows numerous people to “gather together” in one place when it is difficult to get people physically in one location. Lastly, Google calendar allows employees to “figure out where people are and what they’re working on.” Rather than social media, Google is where the employees congregate and collaborate. Without Google, an employee could not easily connect with anyone else in the organization.

IRC

IRC is a chatting system, which allows people to message others in the form of text, much like AIM. Within the less specialized segment of the organization IRC is primarily seen as a tool to interact with people in different buildings or in other departments in order to obtain necessary information. All departments have their own IRC channel, but more specialized teams tend to use their channels more frequently, especially LCTs, Unix Team, and CSA. The general chat room within IRC is used primarily to “get a hold of somebody” if you don’t know how else

to contact him or her. If you know who you want to contact, you directly message them on a private channel. The director of user support services stated he was “trying to get everyone on the same channel so they don’t have to walk back and forth to ask questions.” Those who do not prefer IRC must use it as a medium to reach the more specialized teams, because this is their preferred medium.

IM (Pidgin)

This medium is rarely used to collaborate on projects, but rather used to ask short, quick questions, that require quick answers. For example, a help desk employee asked the coordinator, “What’s the ID number on that?” and the coordinator responded, “Hmm, I’ll message it to you.” Instead of reading the ID number, he quickly messaged the number through Pidgin’s IM. An LCT employee, on the other hand, who works frequently with CSA that’s over in another building, generally has more complex questions and hardly ever uses Pidgin. Generally, this medium is used between members of the same department because it is the easiest to access. However, this would not be the preferred medium for many in the organization.

Phone

Calling an employee is often described as a last resort method of communication. If an employee cannot reach someone through all the other traditional methods, he or she will then attempt to call the desired contact. This sentiment was echoed numerous times. Once, when a coordinator discussed challenges in reaching others in the organization and said, “All phone numbers are posted on one of our job places. If they really wanted, they could text me.” Twice, when another employee discussed reaching on-call staff after hours and said, “I have a list with everyone’s phone numbers in my phone so I’ll start texting but that’s a pain in the butt.” Another time, when an employee stated that “We’ll call somebody...if we need to get a hold of

them immediately.” These statements indicate that using the phone is designated for emergencies. While observing the DSTs, the phone rang and one DST said, “That’s for us but I’m not gonna answer that.” Even when describing the help desk, an employee stated, “They field most of the calls. They’re in the trenches.” This war metaphor indirectly implies that calling is not the preferred medium of communication in this organization. One employee sadly noted, “I personally enjoy phone calls. No one really uses them anymore.”

In person

This medium is primarily used by employees who are in close proximity to one another. The term “in person” is used specifically, rather than “face-to-face”, because many of the in person interactions involve two employees looking at a screen together or looking at each of their own screens while collaborating in the same room. This medium of communication serves three primary functions: relational maintenance, verifying data, and centralizing data. According to one employee, “We have a lot of get-togethers, regardless if lots go to them.” These gatherings serve as a place to “unplug” and focus on the relational aspect of the organization. Many times when employees walk over to someone else, it is to verify or clarify information. For example, after a customer asked a help desk employee a specific question, he responded with, “Let me double check with Kevin.” Lastly, every so often the IT department holds meetings where many employees finally find themselves in the same room. One employee describes it as “So many people have so much different knowledge that sometimes you need to get everyone in a room that knows about stuff together to work through the issues you have.” These meetings serve as a time to centralize data and get everyone in the organization on the same page.

By placing each medium (Google apps, IRC chat, IM through Pidgin, over the phone, and in person) into separate categories, I was able to find emerging patterns amongst the different media. It became clear that each medium carried with it different norms for usage, which provided insight into the organizational culture.

Critical Analysis

Applying critical theory to the organizational structure of the IT department draws our attention to the fact that those in the organization with the information or access to information have power over those who do not. This is reinforced through the barriers created by permissions to access specific information or take authoritative actions. Information is not evenly shared with everyone in the organization for security reasons. Employees also don't treat this hierarchy as a conflict, but rather continue asking those with access to information for necessary information pertaining to their work task. This system perpetuates the need for seeking information as part of every job description within the IT department. For example, a help desk employee will ask a DST what to do with a particular ticket; a DST may ask a Unix employee about networking issues, a Unix employee may ask an LCT information about a particular classroom or lab, etc. Communication technology was therefore created to accommodate this system and create better workflow.

A rapidly changing culture requires constant learning about new technology and information. Those who do not keep themselves updated lose power because they lack necessary knowledge for the job. Those who cannot help others with technology issues are rather useless to the organization. Those who are knowledgeable are more trusted and respected with higher positions in the organization, which provides more access to more information. As a coordinator stated, he has many more rights now as a manager than he ever did as a student worker.

In order for the IT department to function, employees all have to know the basics about computers and slowly learn everything they need to know to do their job. In order to climb the economic ladder and receive a higher position, employees must assimilate into the company culture and learn the jargon, which generally takes 3 months. Without this knowledge, an employee will not succeed. An organization that attracts “nerds” perpetuates the process of assimilation because nerds pride themselves of being technologically savvy and will strive to learn faster in order to fit in and excel.

Different IT departments have different preferences for which communication media they prefer. Strangely, those with more permissions or the “super nerds” as one coordinator described them, prefer more basic media such as IRC. Those lower in the organization with fewer permissions communicate more through IM, phone, or in person. Talking on the phone is oddly described as undesirable and a last resort method for reaching others in the organization. All employees are provided with Google accounts, which makes this medium standard and employees know they can always reach others through their Google accounts. Not being able to reach someone else in the organization was never attributed to the desired contact’s character but rather his or her busy schedule, meaning it is expected that an employee will answer your question.

Discussion

The findings have indicated that social media is not as pervasive in the work place as I had previously hypothesized. Communication technologies, such as Google apps, on the other hand are becoming more increasingly crucial for collaboration and information sharing. The employees within this organization are provided with Google, IRC, and Pidgin accounts automatically, leaving any employee little choice in whether they have a preference for specific

software. This is unlike social media, where people may choose to not have an account and purposefully stay under the radar. Perhaps, if social media is only used to connect to employees outside of the workplace, employees who do not have social media accounts have a more difficult time connecting to coworkers on a personal level; however, this was not studied. On the professional level, though, social media does not seem to interfere with employees' abilities to connect and collaborate for work projects.

Analyzing the findings through organizational culture theory, the interactions observed in this study give insight to the artifacts, values, and assumptions of this organization (Keyton, 2014). The artifacts, or the norms, standards, customs, and social conventions, became obvious after observing all three departments. The implicit standards were that every employee has at least a basic grasp of how to use computers, and that every employee uses the provided media to communicate with others in the organization. Given that employees are provided with accounts to numerous communication technology programs, employees have no excuse to not be available for questions that may arise, to which they have the answers or permissions. So although a hierarchical structure creates the need for employees to seek out those who have the knowledge or permissions, those who possess knowledge or permissions are expected to share and collaborate with others. These standards shed light on the values of open communication, efficiency in solving tasks together, and collaboration. Whenever an employee is difficult to reach, those seeking his or her support utilize the many tools available to them in order to locate the necessary person; these include emailing, sending a message through chat, calling, and even checking the person's calendar to see if they are in their office. The expectation is that employees in this IT department provide an open atmosphere that promotes questions and learning, which are additional values of the organization.

The norms included inquiring about tasks you didn't know how to do and sending tickets to appropriate departments when they were escalated. The social conventions, or unspoken rules, of the organization were many, and employees demonstrated little difficulty in remembering and following them. These included not using the main IRC channel to have a private chat, using IM for quick questions, using phone calls as the last resort method of communicating, and tailoring the mode of communication used to the mode of the desired contact. All of these conventions highlight the organization's ideals of speedy workflow (since the IT department receives endless tickets), and efficient communication. The underlying assumption, beneath all of these artifacts and values, is that employees should be continuously connected to the provided media; the hidden value is that availability is an asset to the organization. Learning, efficiency, and collaboration are all better achieved when employees are constantly connected to technology. While being connected to social media is valued in the personal sphere, being connected to specified media (e.g. email, IRC) is valued in the professional sphere.

It might be worth highlighting that an interesting connection emerges between expected availability and using the phone as a last resort mode of communication. Perhaps because employees are expected to be on-call or constantly connected to various media, they are reluctant to relinquish their time to a more demanding medium where they cannot simultaneously do other tasks, as is possible with IM or IRC chat. As was stated by one employee, asynchronous questions are generally asked through media that do not require immediate attention; answering a phone call, on the other hand, must be done synchronously and employees must leave their current tasks and devote individual attention to the caller. The hesitance and dislike of using phone calls as a medium reflect the dialectical tension between availability and privacy, where

employees are still negotiating their visibility and engagement with other employees despite the department's underlying assumption that employees are available.

The findings in this study coincide with the existing literature, where communication technology serves similar functions to that of social media in terms of finding information, sharing that information, and accessing people (Brozozowski, 2009; Burt, 1992; DiMicco et al, 2008; Gibbs et al., 2013; Leidner et al., 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013). Since information does not spread evenly throughout an organization, having access to all members within the IT department in some ways eliminates the phenomenon of weak ties. An employee does not need to connect with weak ties in the organization to access necessary information, because he or she can already contact whomever they need to within the organization. This may deter employees from actively networking within the IT department if they have easy access to all employees.

Communication technology is also used as a social learning tool within this organization (Gibbs et al., 2013; Leidner et al., 2010; Leonardi et al., 2013). Employees may utilize the many media open to them to learn about how "things are done" in the IT department. Google docs that provide directions on how to solve a specific problem are available on everyone's Google drive. IRC channels include conversations that provide answers on how to do numerous tasks. The main contrast between communication technology and social media is that social media is used as a social learning tool that makes sense of the people and culture, whereas communication technology is used as a social learning tool for how to accomplish tasks. The IT department already tries to tap in to the company's knowledge base in order to increase company efficiency and growth (Brozozowski, 2009; Leonardi and Huysman, 2013). The sharing of knowledge is therefore an expectation. The power flows from the more knowledgeable to the less experienced employees; this is an attempt to create a power balance in knowledge, but not in permissions.

Employees are empowered to solve their own problems, but if they do not have access, they must escalate the tickets to members of the organization that have permissions and authority.

Increased collaboration has also highlighted the differences between the different departments, which has caused some fragmentation in what one employee calls the “us versus them” mentality. This also parallels with existing literature that critiques the assumption that effective communication is characterized by disclosure and general openness (Gibbs et al., 2013; Leonardi et al., 2013). Group membership was definitely stressed at certain times, where members would comment on another department and say “that’s how people are within that department.” Clear distinctions were made daily between the help desk team versus the DSTs and LCTs and CSA and the Unix team. Along with departments, there is acknowledgment that individuals are also diverse and have their own preference for software. These differences create the need to customize which media employees use to contact others depending on the desired contact’s preferred method of communication. This dispels any notion that a centralized system leaves little room for individualism; no employee is ostracized for having a particular preference to any one communication software. These communication softwares, however, are generally within the accepted norms of what any employee would expect others to use. If an employee had a preference for specific communication software that was very unique, it would be illogical to use a medium that no one else used. As long as an employee is available through any of the conventional media of the organization, employees are indifferent to which preferences others choose.

Findings have shown that social capital theory is also at play within this organization. Because knowledge is power and provides a return on investment, those with knowledge have more opportunities for job promotions, participation in significant projects, and for influential

access to important decisions (Burt, 1992). Employees with more knowledge were promoted to coordinators versus regular student employees because they could more effectively manage a group of students and increase workflow. Coordinators also had more access to important decisions and significant projects. This required the student employees to ask the coordinators questions about how to do tasks because the coordinators either had more knowledge or permissions for authoritative actions.

Given these findings, it would be interesting to study how having multiple communication media, such as emailing, IRC chat, IM, and calling on the phone, unites or divides organizations. Studying how employees are perceived by others based on their preferred medium might also be a research question worth studying. Lastly, how Google apps have affected the workplace and what kinds of expectations these apps create would be worth studying as well.

As for the role of social media in the workplace, it is minimal and used primarily for personal and professional networking (i.e. Facebook, LinkedIn). The bigger role lies within the communication technology provided by the organization to its employees to utilize in order to achieve maximum efficiency. During working hours, employees are expected to be available through any of the conventional media, so that employees can access any necessary information and permissions needed to accomplish their work tasks. Being “offline” is simply not an option and impossible in the nature of work done at this IT department. With increased collaboration in the professional sphere overall, not being continuously connected to an organization’s given set of media might hinder an employee’s rise up the economic ladder. Perhaps Google apps pose a greater threat than social media to those who are not connected.

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