

BENEFITS OF A CORPORATE MICROBLOG IN A COOPERATIVE ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT:

The goal is to identify the benefits derived from a social media tool in a cooperative organization. This qualitative research is based on the observation of the activity of a microblog. Fifteen user interviews were conducted representing the promoters, lurkers and active users of the platform. An open coding of the transcripts in Atlas.ti was also performed. The findings show that the benefits derived from the use of the microblog impact positively at different levels of the organization: customer satisfaction, empowerment of employees, organizational environment, knowledge management practices, cooperative's innovation and feedback processes. The limitations are that the results may be applicable to the cooperative organizations but they may differ significantly from those non-cooperative companies. However, the study contributes to show the benefits of social media tools in the context of a small cooperative organization, a little studied context.

Keywords: social media; SMEs; cooperative organization; corporate microblog; ICT benefits.

INTRODUCTION:

Enabled by web-based technologies and based on users' content ideology of Web 2.0, 3.0 and 4.0 technologies (Latorre, 2018), Social Media Tools (SMTs) have proliferated in their types, uses and applications simultaneously opening challenges and opportunities for organizations (Zataraín et al., 2018). An example of this is the use of these tools in learning strategies for the creation of new knowledge (Sein-Echaluze et al., 2019).

In the business context, the use of these platforms to create value is increasingly common (Ammirato et al., 2019; Ngai et al., 2015; He et al., 2013; Meske & Stieglitz, 2013; Wamba & Carter, 2013). Organizations are rapidly adopting SMT to collaboratively develop products, promote open innovation processes (Malsbender et al., 2014; Peltola & Mäkinen, 2014), improve absorption capacity (Ooms et al., 2015), improve communication and customer relationships (Low et al., 2015; He et al., 2013), increase purchase intention and brand promotion (Zhang et al., 2015; Hajli, 2014; He et al., 2013), improve

internal communication and collaboration, and support knowledge transfer and management (Meske & Stieglitz, 2013; Zhao & Chen, 2013; Von Krogh, 2012). Derived from this usage, organizations can minimize costs, increase profits and develop innovation (Pérez, Ramírez, & Topete, 2017).

Taken together, these studies allow us to appreciate the benefits that organizations gain from the usage of SMTs. However, the vast majority of these studies have focused on studying how large companies use SMTs (Luo et al., 2018; Richter et al., 2013; Müller & Stocker, 2011; Gallagher & Ransbotham, 2010; Zhang et al., 2010). Fewer studies have addressed the processes of adoption and use of social media in the context of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (Low et al., 2015; Öztamur & Sarper Karakadılar, 2014; Antunes & Isaias, 2014; Meske & Stieglitz, 2013; Wamba & Carter, 2013).

This situation is striking given the importance of SMEs in several countries since they are considered the engine of their economies, since they generate jobs locally, improve income distribution and contribute to export growth. In this way, they contribute to the development of national industries, rural economies and social entrepreneurship (Biondic, 2020; Rafiki, 2020; Ghayoomi et al., 2020; Dang et al., 2018; Ncube & Zondo, 2018; Bai et al., 2017; Rabie et al., 2016). A review of previous literature shows three fundamental limitations of past studies.

Firstly, previous studies on the adoption of SMTs in the context of SMEs show diverse and sometimes contradicting results due to context differences (Osorio-Gallego et al., 2016) and variety of SMTs. Secondly, studies have paid particular attention to how SMEs use SMTs to e-commerce and marketing activities (Öztamur & Sarper Karakadılar, 2014); however, studies focusing on usage of SMTs to enhance internal processes are needed. Thirdly, the vast majority of studies come from Europe, Asia and North

America, there is still a lack of studies conducted in the Latin American context.

In this sense, the objective of this work is to carry out a qualitative analysis to identify the benefits derived from the continuous and collective usage of a SMT in a cooperative organization. The study contributes to previous literature on adoption and use of social media tools in the SMEs context (Pérez et al., 2017; Low et al., 2015; Wamba & Carter, 2014; Meske & Stieglitz, 2013; Wamba & Carter, 2013), particularly to literature on corporate microblogs (Zhang et al., 2018; Müller & Stocker, 2011; Zhang et al., 2010). Key findings show that the benefits impact upon different areas of the organization including empowerment of employees, the organizational environment, the knowledge cooperative database, and their feedback processes and continuous improvement.

To this end, the paper is divided into six main sections. The second section presents a general review on the origins and proliferation of the use of SMTs focusing on the use of microblogs. The third section summarizes the methodology and describes the methods of collecting and analyzing data. The fourth section presents the results of this study. The fifth section discusses these results and their implications. At the end, the article concludes with the limitations of the study and future research directions.

ORIGINS AND PROLIFERATION OF SMTs:

Bercovici (2010) argues that the first mention of the term social media occurred in 1997 when commenting on the need for organizations to offer their customers spaces for entertainment, communication and participation in social environments. Subsequently, a variety of social media tools have emerged beginning with SixDegrees.com (1997), Blogger (1999), Wikipedia (2001), MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004), Twitter (2004) and Yammer (2008) (Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

The current boom of these technologies is due in part to their advantages over traditional technologies such as e-mail, videoconferencing systems, intranets and instant messaging (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Whilst traditional tools allow access to information in a relatively passive way, SMTs allow interaction in several ways (Latorre, 2018; Ooms et al., 2015; Huang & Shiau, 2015; Antunes & Isaias, 2014). Majchrzak et al. (2013) mentions that unlike the typical knowledge repositories, social media tools radically change the essence of knowledge transfer processes in three different avenues. Firstly, with SMTs knowledge processes are no longer centralized since users have control over when, where and how to contribute with their comments. Secondly, the processes are no longer intermittent; they become continuous since users can join conversations or create new conversations when required. Thirdly, conversations no longer depend on a predefined structure in which the information should be stored in pre-defined locations; this is replaced by an emerging content structure that depends on the planned and unplanned interactions that take place during the knowledge transfer processes.

These differences as a whole, have contributed to the proliferation of social media tools such as blogs, wikis, social networking sites, microblogs and tools of social tagging (Latorre, 2018; Majchrzak et al., 2013; Stockdale et al., 2012). Nevertheless, it is to acknowledge that whilst all these tools have been grouped under the term of social media, they certainly have different uses and qualities (Sein-Echaluze et al., 2019; Kane, 2015; Leonardi et al., 2013). Because the focus of this study brings us to exclusively discuss microblogging in the SMEs context, it is convenient to land this review on the usefulness of using the microblog.

Reinhardt (2009) states that microblogs are defined as a blog on a minor scale in which short and concise messages are shared by people. Likewise, microblogs allow people to share

information about their views, store information for future access and receive instant notifications (Leonardi et al., 2013; Richter et al., 2013). Like other social media tools, microblogs have been widely adopted in society both for personal use at first, and then for professional and organizational goals (Meske & Stieglitz, 2013; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Among the most used microblog tools are Twitter, Tumblr, Jaiku and Yammer (Latorre, 2018).

In the organizational context, microblogs have been used to improve communication between members of the organization, improve customer relationships, be aware of what others do, create new relationships, promote the transfer of knowledge, keep customers aware about their products and services and for marketing purposes (Leonardi et al., 2013; Richter et al., 2013; Curran et al., 2012; Riemer & Richter, 2010). Günther et al. (2009) argues that the performance of microblogs has in organizations is still unclear when they are used for internal communication. However, Zhang et al. (2018) argue that in the last few years the big companies use them to share news, post updates, establish conversations and persuade consumers.

Compared with studies on the external use of microblogs for marketing purposes, few studies have addressed the use of microblog internally (Luo et al., 2018; Leonardi et al., 2013; Schöndienst et al., 2011). Thus, this work is particularly important since the adoption and use of the corporate microblog studied is in a context relatively under-studied, as is a cooperative organization. Cooperatives are defined as a type of economic organization formed from the non-discriminatory, voluntary and autonomous association of several people; who seek to respond to their personal or communal needs through mutual help and collective effort (Izquierdo, 2017). Given this peculiar characteristic of this type of organization where the behavior of its members is governed by values of mutual help, responsibility, democracy,

equality, equity and solidarity (Fajardo & Vaca, 2017). It can be expected that SMTs would be adopted and used provided it allows reproducing and strengthening these organizational values.

METHODOLOGY:

The study took place in a cooperative organization of Mexico City dedicated to the installation and maintenance of software and computer equipment. According to its number of employees and annual sales it is also a SME. A study following the foundations of an emerging research design, primarily using qualitative methods for gathering data and data analysis, allowed identifying a number of benefits gained from the use of a corporate microblogging platform.

The SMT studied (it will be called hereinafter Platform) was adopted by the cooperative since 2015. Access was given to all employees of the organization. The Platform allows its users to publish urgent questions and contributions and make them quickly available to all colleagues. This process is highly relevant to the cooperative because phone calls are received very often by customers and sometimes those receiving the call do not have the answer to certain questions. In these situations, a question is posted in the Platform and immediately a notification alert is automatically sent to all users' mailboxes. Those who see the question and have the knowledge, provide an answer. At a glance, the Platform:

1. Is only available within the cooperative intranet and functions around the concept of blog streams, to which content (postings) can be added on a case by case basis.
2. Is a web platform created to promote exchange of business-related knowledge via forum and microblog postings (not restricted to only 140 characters)
3. Offers its users replicable solutions, support for urgent issues, lessons learned, and best practices.

All users of the Platform were interviewed (15 people) over a period of approximately two years,

to learn about their related experiences, uses, benefits and perceptions of the Platform. An interview guide of semi-structured interviews was used since it allows for flexibility to capture the views of the participants without predetermining their views through an a priori selection of answers (Alvesson, 2003). People who since his subjectivity could provide complementary perspectives on the phenomenon studied in the organization were interviewed (Montoya & Barba, 2015), covering as many opinions as possible. Following this strategy, people were included who:

1. Used the platform very often to ask or answer questions,
2. Used the platform occasionally to ask or answer questions,
3. Were responsible and promoters of the Platform adoption.

Prior to conducting the interviews, following the principles of Netnography (Bowler, 2010), a process of observation of the activity and interaction with the Platform started and lasted six months on a weekly basis. This virtual observation served as a first insight into the type of uses, questions and interactions that took place on the Platform.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 55 minutes and lasted on average 39 minutes. The interview concluded when important points were covered in the guide and when respondents referred to recurring themes found in earlier interviews, following the principle of theoretical saturation (Low, 2019). As a fundamental analysis tool, a thematic analysis was used for the identification, analysis and reporting patterns (themes) through careful reading and re-reading of the data obtained from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Among the different types of thematic analysis, an inductive approach was used in which the analysis was carried out without paying much attention to existing theories that influenced the interpretation of the data.

Rather an open coding process of the data with Atlas.ti software without trying to fit into a pre-existing coding frame was followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of analysis included the following steps: data familiarization, generating initial codes, search for the topics through the codes in Atlas.ti, definition and classification of found topics, presentation of results. It is important to note that these steps were not always followed in a linear way, but iteratively (e.g. although some initial codes were defined, during the revision in Atlas.ti others were identified and integrated). Thus, data analysis was mainly guided by the issues raised in the research question, resulting in the emergence of five major themes presented coming up next.

FINDINGS: BENEFITS FROM THE PLATFORM'S USAGE:

From the interviews with the users and promoters of the Platform and based on the online observation of their virtual activity or users, five types of benefits were identified. Together these benefits contributed to a better performance of the organization under study. The platform was initially planned only for use to allow better and quick responses to customers from the organization staff. Due to the positive experiences from users of the Platform, however, the study gives evidence that a variety of benefits not initially envisioned were gained, and that these benefits had a significant impact on the organization's performance. Table 1 groups the five different types of benefits were identified: improvement of customer satisfaction, empowering people, strengthening the organizational environment, knowledge management and innovation and feedback to the cooperative.

Improvement of customer satisfaction dealt with 1) shorter response time to solving customer's problems, 2) improving quality of solutions based

on collective knowledge, and 3) reducing the cost of support services provided to customers. Together, these three benefits contributed to improve customer satisfaction, making their services more efficient and less time-consuming, and offering cheaper and better solutions to customers.

Empowering people dealt with the benefits generated not directly to customers, but to employees who were the users of the Platform. Empowerment of employees was observed as an improvement on participation and self-confidence to accomplish their duties, so to contribute to an enhanced performance of the organization. Empowerment was observed in four different ways: 1) greater autonomy for decision-making, 2) new opportunities to share knowledge, 3) increase of self-confidence to make decisions, and 4) keeping informed on what is happening around (being in sync).

Whilst previous benefits have to do with customers and employees of the organization, strengthening the organizational environment dealt with benefits at the organizational level. Three benefits were identified, namely: 1) reproduction and perpetuation of cooperative principles and values, 2) promoting genuine recognition, and 3) generation and strengthening of collaborative networks. These benefits contributed to improve the organizational environment as their offline practices, values, principles and ways of accepted behaviors were not only reproduced but perpetuated within the virtual space.

Knowledge management benefits dealt with those which allow the cooperative to manage its knowledge, by facilitating the processes of identification, storage, integration and sharing of knowledge to all cooperative members. Three types of benefits were identified, namely: 1) continuous learning, 2) Benefits derived from the Platform's usage

Benefits	Extract from user's interview
1. Improvement of customer satisfaction	
Shorter response times	"One of the biggest advantages that I see of the tool is that as soon as a question is posted, you got it at your mailbox, and if you know the answer you contribute immediately. That allows you to solve the problem you are facing almost immediately, which is what the customer is expecting from you".
Improving quality of solutions based on collective knowledge	"Among many other things, from my point of view the platform has helped us offer better solutions to customers, because when we use it, what we are really doing is taking the best decision based on previous validated knowledge... it is like if we were working as a team to solve each problem that we face".
Reducing the cost of support services provided to customers	"As the platform allows us to reduce service time, in the end it is reflected in cheaper prices for the maintenance and advice we give them".
2. Empowering people	
Greater autonomy for decision-making	"To me personally [the Platform] has helped me make decisions in a more independent manner. If I have any doubt regarding a question, the platform is the first place where I look for an answer, and often I stay with that answer to go on".
New opportunities to share knowledge	"Sometimes you do not know how to explain or communicate something until someone asks you. I now realize that I have contributed with content on the platform that will be helpful to my peers ... if they had not asked me then I might never have shared it ... and not because I did not want to but because I did not know that others would value it".
Increase of self-confidence to make decisions	"For example, when you give a peer a helpful answer, they always say thanks, and that motivates me to keep contributing with useful answers. Somehow that motivates you because you know that your knowledge can be useful to others".
Keeping informed on what is happening around (being in sync).	"When you get a question on your mailbox you can or cannot answer it. If you know, you obviously give your opinion, but if you do not know the answer, at least you know the situation or the type of problems that your mate is facing with a client. That helps you have something like a pulse of what's happening around you".
3. Strengthening the organizational environment	
Reproduction and perpetuation of cooperative principles and values	"Although we do not say it explicitly, I think the platform has helped us confirm what we were already ... what I mean by this is that we have reproduced in a virtual environment what we were doing offline and we have even strengthened it".
Generation and strengthening of collaborative networks	"When I started answering questions in the platform I did it to help my teammates but then I realized that having an active participation also helped me improve my relationships with them, as well as to establish new relationships. Currently, I can tell you that when I post a comment or an answer, I will benefit from it in this regard".
Promoting genuine recognition	"I have acknowledged, not only in person but also in the platform, the extensive knowledge that my colleagues have ... sometimes peers become very creative and offer great solutions to certain problems. I have congratulated them for giving solutions that I never would have come to my mind...I think that the fact of acknowledge others' creativity can contribute greatly to strengthen the friendly working environment we have".
4. Knowledge management	
Continuous learning	"The truth is that with all the content being generated on the platform you learn all the time ... certainly there are some things that may not be important to you at a particular moment, but you do not lose anything to keep it in mind ... for sure at some point you will face a similar situation".
Identification of experts	"The platform has also been very useful to identify mentors. When someone new join the coop, we generally put him next to those who know more so that the new person can learn from them ... somehow we make sure that the new ones learn from the best".
Generating a reliable, accessible, and flexible virtual knowledge base.	"Since you can use a search engine, you can easily find and solve problems using keywords or even by date, sometimes you remember more and less the date you were talking about a problem and then just can look the information by day or month ... moreover, you know in advance that the information you find there is reliable and that will be useful because it most certainly help you solve your problem".
5. Feedback to the cooperative	
Opportunities to innovate	"Look, there's a before and an after of the platform. After a year of being working with the platform we have improved the customers' satisfaction a lot. And being honest, I think we have done it in an innovative way ... the fact "throwing lots" to a problem using the platform as a means is something, I consider myself novel".
Feedback on the general operation of the cooperative	"We have already received many benefits from the platform, including clearly greater satisfaction of our customers ... that is important but somehow the platform has shown us that many of the things we are doing, we are doing them well and that there are others from which we can learn a lot".
Opportunities for new business models	"It is something I have not discussed with my partners here, but I think that all the content on the platform can easily be used to offer courses to both, our clients and our competitors to share best practices and so on to solve their day-to-day problems".

Identification of experts and 3) generating a reliable, accessible, and flexible virtual knowledge base.

Finally, the benefits related to innovation and feedback to the cooperative have to do with processes of innovation and feedback that can emerge from the knowledge and content found in the Platform. Three types of these benefits were identified: 1) opportunities to innovate, 2) feedback on the general operation of the cooperative, and 3) opportunities for new business models.

DISCUSSION

Social media tools have revolutionized the way people communicate, this in turn has motivated organizations to adopt SMTs. However, it has been argued that SMEs face difficulties when adopting emerging technologies and risks associated with their use (Sulistyowati et al., 2018). SMEs may have negative affects by posting inappropriate reviews, losing control of confidential information, and their employees might waste valuable time using SMTs (Meske & Stieglitz, 2013).

Alternately to what previous studies have found, the current study shows that using SMTs may result in a variety of benefits to the organizations using them. Moreover, the case developed in this work shows that the cooperative organization gained other benefits apart from those that were initially expected. This does not minimize the importance of benefits such as quicker solutions and lower prices to customers, but shows that SMTs can also generate benefits at the individual and organizational levels as well as in the knowledge management and innovation activities of the organization.

In terms of the benefits related to the improvement of customer satisfaction, the results showed that communication between customers and the organization becomes more efficient due to the fact that since the Platform was introduced all members of the organization could provide an

answer, thus going beyond a one-to-one interaction. The category empowering people allows to suggest that SMTs can contribute to make knowledge flows horizontal, and decentralized knowledge from one person to make knowledge more collective. This is beneficial to the organization in that it offers flexibility to make quicker and safer decisions.

The two categories described above in turn contribute to the organizational environment, which is the third category of benefits. In this category it was found that the Platform can promote cooperative values and principles, generate and strengthen collaborative networks and promote genuine recognition. Competition among employees is common within private organizations, nevertheless cooperation in a cooperative organization is not only desirable but sought to accomplish collective goals. Thus, SMTs can help the exchange of knowledge between colleagues or between servers and clients in a horizontal way, this improves the organizational environment by promoting collaboration (Zhang et al., 2018).

The knowledge management benefit shows how the Platform allows for the development of a dynamic knowledge base, useful to the organization and their customers. Von Krogh (2012) argue that this knowledge base turn into the memory of the organization, and its constant review help improve the organizations' processes and services, as well as the development of new products.

Finally, as for the category feedback to the cooperative, the results show that the knowledge base already generated and found in the Platform, help identify failures and successes with customers. Ammirato et al. (2019) says that this type of knowledge becomes crucial to process improvement and training to employees in the organization. There's also the fact that the knowledge base can be an important source development of new products and services development.

CONCLUSIONS:

The present study provides light to improve our understanding on the benefits that can derive from the use of a social media tools in the context of a small cooperative organization. A relatively under-studied context, particularly when SMTs are used within the boundaries of organizations (Luo et al., 2018; Öztamur & Sarper Karakadılar, 2014). However, this research has some limitations. The results derived from one case of a corporate microblog in the context of a cooperative organization, so that they should be interpreted with caution. Since the principles of a cooperative organization may vary from those of a private company, the results of the study may be applicable to this type of organizations and differ significantly from those non-cooperative companies (i.e. private companies).

For example, those who work in a cooperative are partners and owners of the company, which generates a search for common goals and work under similar principles and values. This in turn supports an environment where knowledge flows and transfer of knowledge occurs easily between partners. According with some authors (Pipek et al., 2001; De Long & Fahey, 2000) this differs from a private company where the idea of knowledge is power permeates, and therefore employees have a tendency to protect it to remain attractive to the organizations where they work.

The findings of the study allow deducing a number of implications for those interested in implementing or promoting the adoption and use of social media tools in their organizations, in particular the so-called corporative microblogs:

1. Promote principles of collaboration and cooperation in organizations so that they can be reproduced in virtual environments in order to enhance active participation from users.
2. Evaluating contents, uses and risks that arise from the Platform usage to enable feedback on its operation.

3. Be clear about a detected need to encourage the adoption and use of a social media tool and evaluate the selection of the most appropriate Platform.

Finally, future research can be derived from the study. A first effort could focus on understanding the reasons and enabling factors present in organizations that facilitate the adoption and use of this type of social media. How benefits relate to enabling factors could increase the success of these technologies. A second avenue for further research could explore whether these benefits can be found in private organizations where other interests might be present.

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