The dynamics of digitizing the internal communication: the regulation process of mandated Enterprise Social Networking System (ESNS)

Lapo Mola*, Renata Kaminska†,
Nathalie Richebé‡, Andrea Carugati§

Summary: 1- Introduction -2. Theoretical background – 3. Research context and data collection – 4. Contextual background – case description – 4.1. Collaboration at Alpha ltd - 5. Preliminary findings: ESNS regulation strategies in the adoption process - 6. Concluding remarks

Abstract

In nowadays knowledge intensive organizations – like f.i. IT companies and consultancy firms knowledge sharing process and collaboration represent key success factors for competing in a dynamic business environment. In large organizations characterized by distributed settings, managers need to develop tools and technique that can allow employees and teams dispersed in different geographical area to collaborate and share data, information and knowledge in order to avoid reworks and inconsistencies among projects. The present research in progress paper aims to understand the mechanisms and the tension between the organization that mandates the use of certain technologies and the actors that are supposed to adopt it. The preliminary findings show three different strategies put in place in order to align existing practices and the new logics introduced by the new tool: We have identified three strategies: 1) parallel use strategy; 2) overuse strategy; 3) and tolerant strategy.

* **Lapo Mola**, associate professor, Università degli Studi di Verona & SKEMA Business School, Université Côte d'Azur (GREDEG); email: lapo.mola@univr.it – lapo.mola@skema.edu
† **Renata Kaminska,** associate professor, SKEMA Business School, Université Côte d'Azur (GREDEG); e-mail: renata.kaminska@skema.edu
‡ **Nathalie Richebé**, professor Aix-Marseille Graduate School of Management – IAE; e-mail nathalie.richebe@iae-aix.com
§ **Andrea Carugati,** professor Aarhus School of Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University, Denmark; e-mail: andrea@mgmt.au.dk

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1. Introduction

To promote knowledge sharing among employees and maybe more importantly, to make knowledge contents more transparent and visible to the organization, firms are increasingly implementing Enterprise Social Networking Systems (ESNS). The implementation of these technologies has typically three objectives. Firstly, the functionalistic objective of enabling better knowledge flow among employees. Therefore, employees are more efficient because they can exchange more and faster information.

Secondly, the datification objective of collecting information about employees' work in the organizational memory (Hedberg, 1981). In this perspective, organizations can take better strategic decisions because they have access to data about employees' work that are otherwise very difficult to acquire.

Thirdly, the surveillance objective of monitoring not only employees' work but also the "mood" of the organization through the datafication of work. These three objectives typically co-exist in any type of IT implementation. However, while the first two perspectives largely ignore questions of power and control (Markus 1983, Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1998), the latter body of literature suggests that mandated technologies such as ESNS provide new forms of datafication that enable power and control over employees' knowledge and knowledge sharing practices. While previous literature has focused either on IT recording employees' work automatically or on employees reporting their own work in IT (Cunha & Carugati 2018), social media communication as means of datafication of work has not been widely studied. The objective of this paper is to build on the latter perspective to analyze how the adoption process of mandated ESNS and employee knowledge sharing practices co-evolve over time.

2. Theoretical background

The adoption of mandated information technology should be a no brainer. However, the literature has evidenced many different responses to mandated IT. This is particularly relevant for complex technologies such as ESNS where different groups of actors develop strategies to adapt to other groups' initiatives and practices (Carugati et al. 2018; Mola et al. 2019). Social Regulation Theory (Reynaud, 1988, 1997, 2003 and 2012) offers a particularly fruitful framework for analyzing how actors contribute to the process of rule creation, implementation and revision. Reynaud argues against the traditional distinction between formal and informal rules because official rules are not always formalized, and informal rules are sometimes explicit. Also, written rules are often complemented (or contradicted) by the non-written norms. Reynaud therefore suggests categorizing rules according to their origin and aim. Since rules have authors and "addressees", Reynaud (1988, 1997, 2003 and 2012) distinguishes between control rules and autonomous rules.

Control rules are defined by actors whose objective is to "influence the regulation imposed on employees, to try to control areas of freedom and autonomy that they grant

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themselves" (Reynaud, 1997, p.161). These rules are not always formalized and may be transmitted orally in ways that are partly informal or implicit.

Autonomous rules are instead created by organizational actors in a decentralized fashion and are intended to serve these actors' own designs. Actors develop these rules locally, in order to regulate their own activity and monitor their work themselves; and sometimes to rectify and control rules issued by management (Reynaud, 1997, 2012).

Autonomous and control rules can either co-exist peacefully (almost being unaware of each other's existence) or compete and fight with one another (Reynaud 2003a, p.112) and/or lead to what Reynaud calls **joint regulation**. Reynaud writes that organizational rules are "*endlessly produced, corrected, weakened or strengthened by social actors. There is no such thing as a stable rule, there are only processes of regulation*" (Reynaud, 1997, p.235). Social regulation theory fits the context of implementation of ESNS since it enables us to study the joint regulation of managers and peers in the adoption of the ESNS technology.

3. Research context and data collection

To explore how joint regulation emerges in the process of the adoption of ESNS, we conducted a case study at Alpha (*a pseudonym*) (Yin 2003). Established in Europe at the end of the 1980s, Alpha is now a multinational IT solution provider with more than 14,000 employees. To enhance collaboration and knowledge sharing among employees, Alpha's managers introduced a centralized ESNS. Our data collection focused on the adoption of the mandated ESNS. The case organization provided access to documents, technology and key people, thus facilitating the longitudinal study, which consisted, so far, of three phases, as follows:

The first phase (2015) involved the analysis of the processes and procedures used at Alpha in developing new products and services and of the collaboration practices among team members located in different geographic areas. In order to understand the general context, we conducted 5 semi-structured interviews involving 2 project managers, 1 manager of the Knowledge management center (KM center) in Europe, 2 developers – users of existing collaborative tools. Then, we conducted a three-month-long field observation.

The second phase (2016) involved studying the nature and the role of the different collaborative tools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the KM manager (1), project manager (1) and with the developer-key users (3). We supplemented the interviews with analysis of internal documents. This phase provided a more complete understanding of the technology and the challenges it presented. The accounts suggested tensions between opposing forces with regard to change.

During the third phase (2017–present) we aimed to investigate the different perspectives on the effect of collaborative tools on everyday work practices. We conducted 15 interviews with the Alpha KM manager (1), project managers (2), developer key users (3), and pilot users of the mandated collaborative IT tool (8). We also observed pilot users of the new platform to manage and record data related to their daily activities.

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4. Contextual background – case description

As mentioned above, Alpha ltd is a global enterprise founded late '80s and incorporated by a consortium owned by four major players in travel industry. In the beginning, founders developed Alpha ltd as an independent and neutral global distribution system (GDS), which later became the preferred system for travel agents around the world.

Alpha's portfolio was so successful that it developed many different products helping a wide range of key players within the travel industry support travelers.

The fast exponential growth of Alpha ltd lead to a multinational with a headcount of over 14,000 employees spread-out throughout all five continents. Alpha ltd provides travel technology solutions to help travel professionals such as travel agencies, hotels, airlines, airports, car rental companies, railways, ground handlers better serve their customers. Alpha ltd has very much become an IT company and with this status it becomes important be as efficient as possible. Competitors are continuously evolving and Alpha ltd has understood that they must do so as well. Therefore, they are searching within all internal department innovative solutions to increase their productivity and efficiency.

Their overall goal is to find solutions that empower the business and help the travel industry enhancing and improving their results on a daily basis. To date Alpha ltd has a large product and service portfolio. Each and every product is meant to serve a certain need from one of their specific segments. Today Alpha ltd has two core businesses – Distribution and IT Solutions. They deliver powerful customer synergies by sharing a common technology platform and communications infrastructure.

Today Alpha ltd operates in 190 countries with more than 70 local Alpha ltd Commercial Organizations (ACOs) representing 118 nationalities worldwide.

4.1 Collaboration at Alpha ltd

In such a distributed setting one of the main challenges faced by the management at Alpha was the integration of the internal collaboration among different project teams and different departments. Indeed, many of the projects are run locally, by the regional teams. The challenge is therefore to make available the project details to the rest of the firm. In order to share information and knowledge Alpha has implemented a series of IT tools such as, among others, Opera, SharePoint, Outlook, Lotus Notes, Webex…

The installed base and its heterogeneity have produced, as side effect, the proliferation of data repository, with an increased complexity in the process of searching and finding the information needed. On top of that, the use of the different tools has been "interpreted" and executed by different teams in a different way, according to their needs and it competences. The lack of a single governance policy established at organization level, produced then, an information redundancy and misuse of the available tools.

In order to fix those limits, Alpha management decided to launch the project "Mango apps". Mango apps is an Enterprise Social Networking Systems (ESNS), similar to a

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social network platform, that employees should use in order to share contents, information through different means such as chats, forums, multimedia posts (pictures, videos etc.). This tool has been seen as the most close to the company vision which, to quote one of the project leader: "*is to really focus on the collaboration side in order to undo things socially that you could do differently or that you did differently often before.*"

5. Preliminary findings: ESNS regulation strategies in the adoption process

Our preliminary findings suggest that a large proportion of employees were reluctant to a centralized ESNS. From our data emerges that the system was seen, by some of the users, as a "big brother", designed to reinforce the control over the exchanges among workers transforming those exchanges into data.

We have identified three strategies, two of them were implemented by the user and the last one by the organization. We named these tree strategies: parallel use strategy; overuse strategy; and tolerant strategy.

Parallel use strategy: In some cases, the employees perceived implementation of the ESNS as means to reinforce the control and surveillance over their work. Many employees are engineers who, prior to the introduction of the ESNS, had developed their own collaboration tools – often outside the "radar" of the hierarchy and without any authorization by the management - adapted to their specific project teams' needs.

> *"Our operations will say we are a travel company there are two different mentalities and often the developers will do something because "I think everybody else is too slow" so they will do in their corner" (Prj. Manager 2)*

To show their compliance to the official organizational policy, they started using the centralized ESNS while also keeping using their own tools in parallel.

Overuse strategy: Some employees used ESNS as any other social media (e.g. LinkedIn), managing their profile so that it highlighted their skills and interests. At this point, Alpha's HR department stepped in and attempted to influence what was posted. For example, when employees started filling out their profiles describing their competences, HR immediately closed that option because these competencies were not in line with what was specified in the employees' contracts.

> *The social media approach is complex. The social media sphere goes faster than the official machine. It is important to keep all our data aligned and avoid inconsistencies. Therefore we had to regulate the use of some of the apps. (KM coordinator)*

Under the banner "well, I have tried!" of the overuse strategy, the employees could revert freely to the "old way of doing things".

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Tolerant strategy: In other cases, some of the technical employees admitted that they were not active in the digital conversations on ESNS. Their managers however did not act over this non-use partly because of the status that technical employees have in the organization and partly because these employees were providing good performances. In some cases, there is also a problem of cultural distance as shown by the conversation reported by one of the interviewed:

> *"... I commented on his blog article. I think I was even the first or the second one, so I was like I did my comment, etc.... So I saw a colleague who is a French lady, older. I get along with her really well and I said:*
> - *"So did you see the article?"*
> - *"Yes... Umm... yes its good, its promising "she said, then I said:*
> - *"So did you reply" and she replied:*
> - *"Oh no!" and I said*
> - *"Why not?" and she said,*
> - *"People who reply on that just want to get noticed" and I was like... I replied*
> - *"Do you think I want to get noticed?" And she said something like*
> - *"No you're different, you are American." So, the culture is..."*

6. Concluding remarks

Overall, our findings suggest that targeted employees are not passive recipients of the control rules that attempt to introduce more transparency in their knowledge sharing practices. In the case we analyzed, the organization resisted employees' initiatives to develop their own knowledge sharing tools as much as employees resisted attempts to convince them to use the "official" technology (while sometimes faking to use them). Both managers and employees adapt over time to the other party's initiatives and practices. Our paper therefore explores how digitalization and datafication shape organizations over time through the interaction of different regulation sources that "resist" as well as adapt to each other. It also explores the idea that although managerial forces try to impose more transparency on employees and exert control over their knowledge sharing practices and contents, they also occasionally "tolerate" the non-official tools and practices that they have developed. We suggest that overall, actual IT practices are made of official and non-official tools that coexist, as a result of a tacit, non-visible compromise that emerged over time.

We attempt to capture this complex dynamic by conducting a careful longitudinal description of each step of the ESNS regulation process over two years. We detail the evolution of actors' online knowledge sharing practices and strategies over time, how they "respond" and react to each other, sometimes struggling and developing strategies

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to impose their will and sometimes accepting and managing the coexistence of different tools. Theoretically, we contribute to the knowledge sharing and adoption of IT literatures by bringing the concept of joint regulation.

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